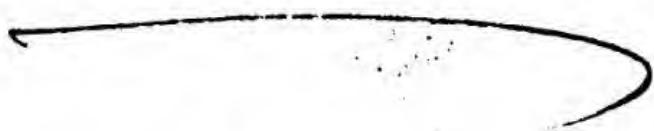


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Milton L. Tigheel



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~~etc~~ BUTTERFLY MAN ~~etc~~

From Texas, where he was born, the long graceful legs of Ken Gracey bore him to a palatial villa in Malibu, to a brothel in Tia Juana, thence through hobo camps to the magic boards of Broadway. . . . In Texas, Ken Gracey was a normal young man. . . . His transformation into the flaming Butterfly Man, darling of the Third Sex, who rockets through riotous revels from Coast to Coast, is a tragic tale of the youth who never knew himself until too late. Behind the scenes in the secret circle of the half-men, Ken Gracey lifts the veil for all to see the joys of anti-social love . . . and its horrors.

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BUTTERFLY MAN

by Lew Levenson

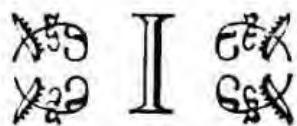
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"THE thing then is, Ken, remember your dad, keep out of strange beds and wash your neck reg'lar," Uncle Joe had said. "Son, you're a man now." Ken's breath had been stilled as he listened. "You're leaving home," continued homely Uncle Joe. "You've been pampered a bit too much. Folks call this Texas, and Texas it is to us older ones—but to you, Texas could be New York or Chicago or most anywhere."

That was Uncle Joe.

Dad was different. Dad was thin. Uncle Joe was fat. Uncle Joe's clothes hung about him loose-like. Dad's fit. But Ken more or less liked Uncle Joe because he was so human. Dad, of course, was human—a sweet, reasonable father, worried by failing eyes and failing business—but for a young fellow, take Uncle Joe.

The car turned into the Camino and Ken took a look at Weber's Drug Store. Funny to be leaving it, leaving the Coca Cola cowboys and Ike and his son, Dave, and the jolt of alkie that Ike served with lemon phosphate straight. Code—code for a slug of alkie and that dizzy feeling and dad with his Presbyterian manners and thin mouth setting itself like a line dividing heaven and hell.

Here on the corner of Alamo, the church. Ken sat straight. Indefinable his reactions toward the church. He did love Jesus. Not that pale Jesus of Mr. Barton's dry sermons, but the lush vivid-cheeked Christ who had ap-

peared to him as in a vision a long, long time ago . . . or had his vision been a forgotten dream?

Ken turned away from the church. Why, he did not know. At seventeen one does not decide whether one shall conform or dissent—that is, a he-man does not; and Ken concluded that as of this July morning, straight in the back seat of Mr. Lowell's Packard, he was mighty glad to get away from Mr. Barton's First Presbyterian Church of Selma.

"Comfortable, boy?" said Mr. Lowell.

"I'm all right," said Ken.

"Homesick already?" the older man placed a hand on Ken's sleeve and smiled.

"No," replied Ken flatly. Mr. Lowell looked out of the window. The car passed the two low Spanish-type buildings of Selma High. Ken felt a sharp, prickling sensation in his throat. Selma High was disappearing in the dust haze as Johnson stepped on the gas; and Selma High did mean a lot to Ken Gracey. That there frame house back of the school on Council Street—what laughs at what dirty stories! And the gym! To be free, young and white in that gym . . . to stretch long arms and legs, to take in deep, sweet breaths, to ride the horse, row the machine, race Bud and Bill and Lee. And beat them, what's more, beat them! In basket-ball to rise up, up and up . . . learning form, dribbling, tip-offs, the intricate signals of "Doc" Weston, the keen technique that brings one to success—success—center in the Dallas game—four fouls, three goals, applause and fame.

The town dwindled into flat sandy prairie. Ken turned to Mr. Lowell and said: "Makes one sure feel sorta wobbly, this going away from home."

"Ken," said Mr. Lowell, "home is where you love. In California you will learn to love a new home, a gloriously beautiful home. My boy, I'm a born Texan. I shall always come back to these barren acres because here did the seed of me sprout. And in the bitter future, I shall be borne back to Texas soil and here shall I eternally rest. But, Kenneth, I am taking you into the great world. This summer, we shall live in Southern California. Next winter in Miami. Next spring in Paris. You must always hold Texas close and dear to you. But Texas, great as she is, is but a fragment. The world, Ken—that is your apple pie. Cut it—as you will."

Ken—seventeen—thrilled to these inspired words. The older man—old because of his graying Van Dyck, with his slanting watery-blue eyes, his oddly precise manner of clipping his words, his neatly tailored clothes, his ivory-headed stick, his faintly perfumed breath—placed that square-tipped-fingered hand again upon Ken's sleeve.

"My boy," he said, "you make me very happy."

If Ken was making Mr. Lowell happy, Mr. Lowell was leading Ken to Kingdom Come. At this moment when Dawson County was ending and roadside signs about the boll weevil advertised the coming of Kent County, Ken shook his head abruptly as if to make sure that he was fully awake. He then turned to Mr. Lowell.

"Mr. Lowell," he said, "I don't know how you made father let me go with you."

"It was easy," Mr. Lowell said. "I told him you were a handsome young brute and that you deserved better than a Selma upbringing. Your father is a sensible man. If he weren't, you'd be working in his office and you'd be set-

tling down in Selma and marrying—or some such ridiculous thing."

Ken listened and still did not understand. He knew that Mr. Lowell owned the Lowell Block on the Camino, that he held a mortgage on the Gracey home and that he seldom resided in the sturdy white-washed Lowell mansion opposite Selma Park. He knew that Mr. Lowell was a mysterious man, a man much feared by those who owed him money—and his father owed him back interest on a mortgage.

To have been noticed by Mr. Lowell was something. That day when Mr. Lowell made a beautiful speech to the graduating class of 1922, then dropped over to visit Ken's father, would always be memorable to Ken.

"I want you to let me take your son with me to the Coast," Mr. Lowell had said. "I plan to train him to be a business associate, as I have already trained so many other boys."

Ken could not believe his ears. Yes . . . he wanted to leave Selma. He had been happy in Selma High. Mr. Coleman had praised him as an exemplary youth. He had been a basket-ball star. Yet he really wanted to quit Selma. What more could he do in the little Texas town? Why should he not become an associate of Mr. Lowell? Why should he not go to California?

Yet he was troubled by a persistent desire to know why Mr. Lowell had chosen him and not Lee Graham or Bill Parrott.

"How did you come to pick me out, Mr. Lowell?" he asked.

"You are a fine young animal—you are a gifted young man," Mr. Lowell replied.

The words rattled against Ken's ears emptily.

"But why me? There's others."

"Ken, I want you to enjoy this trip. Tonight, in El Paso, we shall talk."

"This is Henry Fraser, Ken," Mr. Lowell said. Henry Fraser, seated astride a gilt chair in the El Paso Hotel suite, puffed on a long Mexican cigarette and regarded Ken with dull eyes.

"Pleased to meetcha," he replied. "It's been awfully boring," he turned to Mr. Lowell. "I told Fran I didn't want to go to a dude ranch alone."

Henry Fraser seemed like a sissy, Ken concluded. His clothes were too well tailored, his waist too wasp-like, his affected speech and tiny moustache ridiculous.

"Fran has been too commanding," he continued. "Too damned imperial, if you get what I mean. I always preferred you, La—"

"I want to show you the view from the bedroom window," said Mr. Lowell suddenly. "Ken will excuse us."

"I didn't know. I really didn't know," said Henry Fraser, with curious emphasis. "I don't care for views. Though your taste is improving. I'll tell Fran not to worry about me."

"Is Fran your wife?" Ken interrupted.

"Quite," said Henry Fraser. And that ended the conversation.

Ken thought Mr. Lowell's suite was lavish. He had stopped at the Jefferson in St. Louis on the basket-ball team's northern jaunt last winter; but the Jefferson was a dog-house compared to this. These elegant rooms, the heavy carpets, the green and gold wainscoting, the respectful

humility of the manager before Mr. Lowell—and the dinner . . . wine . . . a liqueur—then, this odd conversation, in which he took little part: he felt elated by this peep into the gilded future.

"Henry," said Mr. Lowell politely, "Kenneth is to be my protégé. I am a lonely old man. I have no son of my own. I plan to teach Kenneth life as I see it."

"Estimable, La, estimable," said Henry Fraser. "You are a true philanthropist."

"If I must say so, Henry," Mr. Lowell spoke with unusual acerbity for Mr. Lowell, "you are rotting, positively rotting."

Henry Fraser wore a neat polkadotted tie and a handkerchief to match. He carefully blew his nose and made an unintelligible remark.

"We're leaving in the morning. I had planned to devote an hour or two to Ken's curriculum at Flintridge Academy. That is, if he chooses to go to Flintridge Academy."

"I'm sure I shan't delay you," said Henry Fraser. Ken thought he understood that Henry Fraser wanted to be entertained in some fashion by Mr. Lowell. But he proceeded to say good-night and departed.

After Henry Fraser was gone, Ken asked Mr. Lowell who he was.

"An ungrateful youth, of a vile and insupportable temperament—but an old friend," Mr. Lowell quickly added.

They sat, the young man and the old man on the Louis Quinze chaise-longue, and the broad-shouldered hazel-eyed Ken seemed frail beside the bulk of old Lowell. The tall Texas youth sat in abashed deference, waiting for his protector to speak.

"Life—that is, your life—has been simple, Ken," Mr.

Lowell began. "Too simple. I know Selma. I know you have learned to depend upon Selma people, Selma stores, Selma homes for your life.

"I am appealing now to your mind. I want you to think of me not as you think of your father, that is, not as a god nor as a man, but as a being far closer to you than either. You and I . . . we shall seek the same thing together. You shall give me youth—I shall give you wisdom.

"First you must forget Selma. When we reach California, I shall enshrine you in my most beautiful of homes. You shall possess everything there that is mine. You shall do as you please, live as you please—but become what I please." His inflection changed with these last words. Ken fancied his dull blue eyes became sharper.

"What do you mean?" Ken asked.

"Not now—I shan't tell you now. First I want you to live. Tell me, dear boy, what do you want most to be?"

Ken flushed as the old man stared, awaiting an answer.

"I don't know yet."

"I shall wait. We shall relax, stop talking, go for a walk perhaps. Or what you will."

"Mr. Lowell," said Ken, "I'm tired. I was up this morning at five. May I go to bed?"

"Of course—of course. I forgot. Forgive me." Mr. Lowell sighed. "Perhaps I should turn in too. We have a long drive before us tomorrow." He rose and offered a hand.

"My boy, believe in me—will you?"

Ken rose and faced Mr. Lowell. "I believe in nothing else."

He was amazed at these words. He himself, he decided, was not speaking. He could not have said such a silly

thing. He had always been gay, bold, certain—in Selma, in far away Selma. The possibility of going to California with Mr. Lowell had never entered his head until that day when he was graduated.

And that was a week ago, only a week ago. Now he felt certain that he was changing so rapidly under the influence of this extraordinary old man that he could not imagine what life would have been without him.

"Like Socrates' slave," Mr. Lowell was saying, "you have lived in utter darkness all your life. Now in the light you are blind.

"Tomorrow—in a few days—in California, your eyes will accustom themselves to the new light and you will learn what our marvelous world—ours—yours and mine—really is. We'll wait until then."

Naked beneath the shower, Ken rejoiced as the sharp shafts of water played upon his firm muscles. His rippling brown hair glistened. His cheeks were flushed.

He stepped out of the shower compartment and proceeded to lave himself with thick suds, soapy foam which soon covered him like a lustrous lacy sheath.

Back into the bath—then quick darting painless stabbing cold water.

He stepped out of the shower compartment again. The thick folds of a Turkish towel embraced him. He was warm, alive, vital.

He laughed as he glanced at the clock. Twelve-thirty. He could stay awake all night. The drowsy indifference he had felt in the other room was gone. He wanted to see himself as he really was, to talk to himself so that he would understand the stranger who was being born within him.

He stood naked before the room-high mirror and could have cried with delight for the supple youthfulness of his body. Thus naked, he became truly beautiful; no blemish in the straight, graceful lines of his form. His shoulders were strong and his arms tapering. His chest was full and hairless—his stomach flat and firm. His sex was wreathed in dark, reddish-brown hair that curled with the natural abandon of a Greek statue's.

His legs . . . here came the secret of Kenneth Gracey's joy in living. These legs of his—long, endowed with mighty sinews and an uncommon elasticity—they gave him that speed which had won him a place on the track team and the basket-ball team at Selma High. They had born him to the prized goal of success in athletics. Now, as in the flush of happy vitality he began to move rhythmically, first with arms, then with legs, he felt that urge toward a dance, a wild, naked dance of pagan ecstasy. He watched himself move, facile, swaying. His legs now arched in a sweeping kick, a pivoting thrust high above his head. He spun about, hearing an unheard rhythm in the quickening pulses of his heart.

As he did so, Mr. Lowell entered the bathroom. Ken continued to dance. The old man watched him closely. Suddenly Ken stopped.

"Oh, boy!" he cried gaily.

"Happy?" Mr. Lowell asked.

Ken turned.

"There isn't anything else I want." He slipped into his dressing robe. "Thanks to you."

"Dear boy," said Mr. Lowell, "I have given you nothing—yet."

XIIII

"I CALL this Star-ridge," Mr. Lowell said, "because here only I come, and the stars. . . ."

Velvet California nights, stars so bright that they seemed like lanterns hung in a velvet sky, fit canopy for the panorama spread before Ken and his patron.

"This is my monastery," Mr. Lowell added. "Yours, too. There's nothing you can't do here. Swim, race, ride, play at games, music . . . and then there's the organ."

They ascended stairs. Star-ridge clung to a side of Flintridge against the battlemented mountains. Above, Big Tijunga and Little Tijunga, Pickens Canyon and the Sierra Madres, with Mount Wilson towering against the moonlit background. Below, a carpet of lights, the deep cleft of the Arroyo and Devil's Gap. Everything was as fantastic as the journey through the desert to this castle of Star-ridge. They left the garden with its overpoweringly sweet scent of orange blossoms and entered.

"It isn't real, Mr. Lowell," Ken said.

The organ rose to the top of the house. The old man sat before the manuals and began to play.

"My fingers are stiff," he apologized. Then, as the reeds roared: "This is by Johann Sebastian Bach, greatest of all composers." The pedal notes thundered, the trumpets pealed, the earth shook. Little by little the consummate majesty of the music died. Angels' voices swooningly sang a dulcet melody. Ken held his breath in awe.

"You play mighty fine, Mr. Lowell," he said.

Mr. Lowell swung about. "Ken, you are at home. Come, I'll show you your room."

The bedrooms were below. Ken entered his room. "Elsie De Wolfe designed his," said Mr. Lowell, "cream and green . . . a touch of garden between walls. The bed is better than mine. Sit down, dear boy."

Kenneth noticed that his other suit was already hanging in the wardrobe, placed there by the butler. He sat facing Mr. Lowell, who watched him for a moment, then took his hand and held it.

"You are going to be splendid, Kenneth," he said. "This is a beginning. Tomorrow a tutor, a tailor, a career."

"A career?"

"Yes. You are not here only because I prefer to have you here. You must work, study, rise. Do you want to go to school?"

"Perhaps." Kenneth noticed scented incense rising from a curiously carved ivory burner. The very air was laden with perfume.

"Tomorrow," said Mr. Lowell, "I must go north to inspect some of my property. When I return, you will tell me what you want to do."

"How long will you be gone?"

"A few days." A smile flitted across the lips of the old man. "You will miss me?"

"Yes."

"I like to hear that. Tell me . . . do you miss your father?"

Ken had not thought of his father—not even of Uncle Joe—since he had arrived in Pasadena. Now his face was

darkened by fear that his father would worry about him. What should he do? Telephone? Wire?

"Do nothing, dear boy," Mr. Lowell advised. "Forget him. That sentimental attachment you feel for him now will soon pass. He is not worthy of you."

Ken's protest at this slur upon his father was written upon his face.

"Your father did not understand you. I do."

"I know," said Ken.

"Unfortunately, your father can never understand you. He is a little Texas lawyer. You are to be a man of the world.

"Tonight, we shall go down into the city. I shall show you Los Angeles and Hollywood, Beverly Hills and the sea. Have you ever seen the sea?"

"No," Ken replied.

He wanted to ask Mr. Lowell if Los Angeles, Hollywood, Beverly Hills and the sea all belonged to him. But this he did not do. He accompanied the old man to the patio where a limousine awaited them.

They were driven down through Chevy Chase to a city of colored lights.

"Like you, I was born on flat prairie," Mr. Lowell told Ken. "Our homeland is a dreary one . . . no variety . . . no depth. That is why I choose now to live in beauty. Here in Southern California is beauty; in New York, in Palm Beach, in Paris. We Americans of the Middle West and South are bitten by the monotonous ugliness of our country. We are stern uncompromising people who are born, live and die with little beauty. We are responsible for hatred, rancor, bitterness. We fill the world with narrow shallow thoughts. I am not entirely pleased with these Cali-

fornia cities. They are, for the most part, ugly imitations . . . petty and unworthy of this glamorous land. Here and there are lovely natural spots . . . the hills, the sea."

They entered Hollywood. On the Boulevard were handsome youths and pretty girls.

"I wish I might spend these next few days with you. I should like to teach you what to do and what not to do."

The car entered a driveway and halted before a porte-cochère. A doorman greeted Mr. Lowell.

Within, an old-fashioned mansion, diners in evening dress, a long bar, before which sat elegant women and smart men. Ken thought he recognized movie stars in the crowd. He was too enthralled to speak.

Mr. Lowell stood beside him and ordered two side-cars. Ken, accustomed only to sharp, undiluted grain alcohol served in syrups, drank the blend of brandy and Cointreau with a single gulp.

"Be careful," said Mr. Lowell. "That's a powerful drink."

In cautiously chosen words, the old man pointed out the famous ones in the throng of drinkers: motion picture executives, directors, actors and actresses. He led Ken up winding stairs to the game room, where roulette, dice and black jack attracted groups of players.

"This is the essence of cosmopolitan life in Southern California," said Mr. Lowell. "I seldom come here. These people are too busy thinking about money to interest me. I choose my friends differently. After you know me better, you will understand why."

Again the limousine sped through palm-lined streets, along flower-banked roadsides. Suddenly a steep climb, then a steeper descent to the ocean level.

Quiet blue-black water, curving fingers of land. Along the wide beach, flickering fires.

"We shall go to Malibu. I have a villa there," said Mr. Lowell.

For a few minutes the car drove along the ocean highway, parallel to the beach. Then a sharp turn to the east, up and up to a hillcrest. There a low rambling Monterey cottage.

Johnson's white teeth gleamed as he held open the limousine door. Within, Kari, the Japanese butler, silently pointed to the linen-topped table, ready for supper for two.

Kari smiled mysteriously. Mr. Lowell patted the Japanese on the shoulder.

"Lonely for me, Kari?"

"Yes, Missee Lowell . . . lonesome like the sea."

From the patio, Ken saw the wide peaceful ocean. Overhead, the bamboo screen was drawn back so as to admit the sham light of a metallic moon. A lantern swung from a rod, barely moving in a fitful breeze.

"This is Malibu Canyon," said Mr. Lowell. "Here we are above and away from those we do not choose to know. My road is truly private . . . the next house is a mountain-top shack eleven miles away.

"Here no one comes who is weak or insipid or uninteresting. Here come my choicest friends, those who are like you—sturdy—straightforward, fine."

They stood against the patio wall and the older man's arm fell about Ken's shoulder.

"Look into my eyes," Mr. Lowell said. From somewhere in the darkness came two glasses of sparkling champagne.

"Drink," said Mr. Lowell.

The brilliant bubbles charged the dry wine with vitality. Ken's head, cleared by the night ride, swam in the glowing stimulation of the champagne.

"We are to be very happy together, you and I," said Mr. Lowell.

Ken smiled honestly into Mr. Lowell's face. The gray beard's point curled slightly. The watery eyes shone. The arm dropped from Ken's shoulder. Mr. Lowell turned to the linen-covered table.

"Caviar, truffles, wine—" he said as they sat down.
"Here is magic, beauty and happiness."

"I sure appreciate your interest, Mr. Lowell," said Ken.

"That is not enough. What do you want to be?"

"I don't know."

"A doctor? A lawyer? An artist?"

"An artist, maybe."

"Paint?"

"No, Mr. Lowell. Since we are here in Hollywood, why can't I learn to act?"

"You can. You shall."

"Or dance. I love to dance."

"As I saw you dancing in the hotel the other night?"

"Yes. I was very happy then."

"And not happy now?"

"I can't explain. This is all too much. I don't understand."

"I know. I know exactly what is troubling you. You are fighting your old self. That is unnecessary. In America, one learns to fight one's self, to beat and abuse one's self, to defeat one's self. For what?"

"I don't know."

"For cruelty's sake. But this is my special country. Here

we live in our own world. No ugliness. No deceit. Above all, no women. Do you understand?"

"No, Mr. Lowell."

"Well, then . . . Kari, pour wine." And as Kari poured: "Dear boy, in a few days you shall go to the finest dancing school in California. In the meantime, forgive an old fool for preaching at you. Come . . . drink."

Whether because of the wine, the soft warmth, the penetrating voice of the old man, the strange deep bed, or because he was not tired, Ken could not sleep. He tossed. He turned and twisted. He threw his covers aside. He lay naked.

The night moved silently on. His confused thoughts tried vainly to flee from this unreal California back to the substance of home. He must think of something comfortable, friendly, secure. He must think of Texas, of long, straight roads on wide prairie, cotton fields, corn fields, a homely town, folks.

He must recall the big game. He must remember the way the team broke training . . . the hay-ride down to Wall's Creek, the alkie that tasted raw like fire after so long a period of abstinence.

He must remember Hazel Greene, who sat next to him in the hay. She was a cute thing, round and roly-poly. He was drunk. She was drunk. They began to tickle each other, drunk-like. His head was large as a pumpkin, his eyes glassy, when she did that curious thing.

He felt the cleverness of it, the perfected rhythm, the knowing pulse. He wondered how and why she knew so much, little Hazel being only sixteen.

And drunk as he was, it made him a little ill. Like smelling sulphur. Like tasting cold fried mush.

And yet, in retrospect, there was a moment, a long, hesitating moment when he remembered nothing.

This moment was then, and now was now.

Only now it was black as only black can be and a shadow fell into the blackness, a shadow vague, yet like Mr. Lowell, a very silent, a very far away shadow, so negative, so delicately negative that, in the morning, Ken did not know whether he had had a very beautiful dream.

XIIII CXX

WHEN Ken awoke, Mr. Lowell had already departed. It was long past noon, the western sun was already slanting into the bedroom, with its plaster monk enshrined in a niche opposite Ken's bed. The monk regarded his own round belly with suitable piety and Ken mused upon the strange difference between his own life of this day to come and his past life.

For he was quiet, composed, rested. The long night was gone. This day was to begin his career.

Kari it was who informed him that "Missee Lowell he is gone away, with suitable orders to you." These orders included a rub-down and massage, far more soothing than any Ken had received from "Bones" Trotter, the Selma High trainer. When Kari was through with him, in accordance with Mr. Lowell's instructions, a certain Seward Pawne appeared, announced himself as the assistant to Mr. Lowell's private secretary and explained that Ken was to visit Marchiotti, the tailor.

Mr. Pawne was English, exceedingly self-effacing, with a round, pudgy expression of contentment and a deferential attitude.

"Mr. Lowell is very thorough-going," he said. "He has told me exactly how to entertain you during his absence."

And thus Ken saw Southern California. Long rides into the mountains, Johnson at the wheel. Horseback up bridle-

paths back of Flintridge, an evening in the Pasadena Theatre, dinner in Los Angeles at Victor Hugo's.

Mr. Pawne carefully assisted Ken in correcting his pronunciation. Ken discovered new words and old words said in a new way. He learned details of etiquette, the correct manner of entering a theatre, how to order a course dinner, what to wear, especially what to wear.

Marchiotti, swarthy, with warm Italian eyes that gleamed as he measured Ken, created sack suits, morning and evening dress, sport costumes, a riding habit, overcoats, even an aviator's jacket and hood.

On the day on which his wardrobe was complete, Ken received a visit from Mr. Pawne.

"Is everything satisfactory, Mr. Gracey?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Ken replied. "But when does Mr. Lowell return?"

"That's hard to say. And I do suppose you are a trifle bored."

"I'd like to be doing something. This is swell, living like this, fixed up in this outfit too, but I really haven't got anything to do."

"Mr. Lowell did say to take you to the school of Terpsichore, Mr. Gracey, that is, if you cared to study dancing," Mr. Pawne remarked.

To Ken's query, Mr. Pawne explained that Buddy Nolan taught dancing on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. He was the very best teacher in the city, said Mr. Pawne.

"And may I drive a car there, myself?" asked Ken.

"Certainly. You may use the Rolls roadster."

With Mr. Pawne at his side, Ken drove the high old Rolls-Royce down to Hollywood. The School of Terpsi-

chore occupied a Grecian temple on the Boulevard. The Muse, in person, adorned the portal. She was weather-beaten but still graceful.

Buddy Nolan interrupted a class to greet Mr. Pawne and to show Mr. Gracey his establishment. The School of Terpsichore supplied many dancers to the movies and the theatre. Neophytes in practise clothes, boys in shorts, girls in trim bathing suits, stretched and rolled and bent their bodies earnestly.

"Will this do, Mr. Gracey?" Mr. Pawne whispered, as the tour of the school ended.

"It's great!" Ken cried. "I'll stay here today."

A day at Buddy Nolan's ripped away the veil from Ken's mind. He felt alert, alive for the first time since arriving in California. These languid semi-tropic days and moist nights, the rich food, the luxury in which he lived had deadened the nervous resilience which had characterized his activities back home in Selma. Now that he danced, the crafty face of Mr. Lowell vanished temporarily from his memory. The cajoling voice, the unctuous manner, that mystifying wizardry, compound of wealth and sinister devotion, was withdrawn as if it had never been.

At the conclusion of Ken's first class, Buddy Nolan sent for him.

"You're marvelous," beamed the dancing teacher. "My dear, you *are* marvelous. I have never had such a beginner since I opened the school. You already possess a definite style. You are as graceful as a woman."

Nolan was tiny, frail, with a light, shrill voice. He dressed in slacks and smoked incessantly. On his ring finger was a huge moonstone, which he rubbed from time to time against his cheek. "My boy," he continued, "we

are going to be fast friends. I don't care if you are La Lowell's protégé, I am going to make you mine . . . in the dance, of course."

For three days the wine of youth coursed through Ken's veins. He practised until his muscles stretched taut over weary bones. His long legs swung high again and again over his head. Buddy Nolan helped him personally to acquire a back kick. In experimenting with this step, Buddy stumbled upon a side-kick, a natural graceful swooping movement, which he enthusiastically hailed as a novelty greater than any he had created.

The other students of the School of Terpsichore marvelled at Ken's ease. He liked them for their frank admission that he would surely excel them all upon the stage. Yet he was shy and did not join them in their gossip nor in their frequent walks to the corner drug store for sodas and alkies mixed with Coca Cola. A pert little girl, who identified herself as Anita Rogers, "unattached and willing to stay so," challenged him with the taunt "high hat"; but he only smiled at her as she pouted and turned away.

He enjoyed his hours of freedom greatly. The blue Rolls purred easily through highways and boulevards. It took Ken from mountain to ocean, from Beverly Hills to Hollywood, where, in daytime, the papier-mâché quality of the city's homes and business buildings made life itself seem cheap, gaudy and gay.

Ken was tempted to park the Rolls and to roam through the movie city, which lay restless beneath white sunshine at the foot of the endlessly varied hills. But the car and the city were not his to play with. He drove hurriedly on, as if fleeing through a dream.

Star-ridge, like Hollywood, was unreal. Mr. Pawne became an incredible character, a pottering nuisance; Kari's innumerable attentions and his pigeon English fluttered annoyingly about. The vast house held Ken imprisoned as in a gilded sarcophagus.

He could not meet his dancing-schoolmates on their own plane. He could read in their eyes the fear and contempt they felt for him. He was rich; many of them were very poor. He was "different"; they were "ordinary."

One of the boys—a snub-nosed, pleasant Jimmy Smith, who was very adept at picking up new and sensational tap "breaks"—watched Ken's performance with envy and admiration.

"Been working long?" he asked.

"Two weeks," said Ken curtly and turned away. In Ken's mind at the moment was exhilaration at the discovery that he could kick straight and true to the back of his head. He was surprised to hear Jimmy Smith say: "Because you're old Lowell's latest chicken doesn't mean you can lord it over me, Gracey."

"What do you mean by that?" Ken asked.

"As if you didn't know—" said the other and turned away with a gesture of disgust.

Buddy Nolan met Ken at the gate.

"Going home?"

"Not for an hour or two," Ken replied. "Mr. Pawne said Mr. Lowell might fly in from Tanopah today. He owns mines up there in Nevada."

"How about a drink with me at the Rendezvous?"

"What's that?"

"A spot on Hollywood Boulevard."

"I'm on."

As Ken drove the dance master to the Rendezvous, he heard lavish praise of Mr. Lowell.

"La's a powerful friend, Ken," said Nolan. "Would it surprise you to know that he put me in business?"

"Not at all. But tell me, Bud, how come Jimmy Smith doesn't like him?"

Nolan rubbed the moonstone on his cheek and gazed quizzically at Ken. Then he began to chuckle.

"Called you a name, I bet."

"No—"

"He's not the type, Ken. Forget him."

"Don't say anything to him about it, will you?"

"I never talk to that kind about personal matters. Don't let La Lowell hear you gossip about him to outsiders."

"I didn't say a word, Bud."

Ken was vaguely nervous as he entered the Rendezvous. It was a large, rambling house of shingles streaked with patches of faded color. A low wall almost hid it from the view of passersby. Within, a long room, tables set before benches which lined the walls.

Bud was greeted by Jackie Jackol, a square-chinned woman of forty-five, husky-voiced, loose-limbed, hair plastered closely against her rounded head.

The Rendezvous was half-filled. Nearly all the guests were men although, in a dim corner, sat a quartette of young women.

"This is the place to come if you want to be free," said Bud. "By that, I don't mean that you can't enjoy yourself elsewhere. But I'm sure you feel the peace of this room. I'd rather drink bad gin here than champagne at the Cocoanut Grove."

"Why?" Ken asked naively.

"Look around," said Bud. "Everyone knows everyone else. Jackie's a true friend. The boys and girls come to her with their problems and their troubles. She solves everything by serving gin. If you can pay—great. If you can't—great."

"That's Hal Romans, over there. He's a psychic, on the side. Odd chap, a little demented perhaps, but true. That's Jean Duval, the little fellow—stealing an hour from his studio—he is an artistic publicity man, catering to the more decadent movie stars.

"The girl in the center, Kay Regan—she's a young lawyer. She doesn't practise because she spends too much time worrying about the fate which made her a woman instead of a man. I call her a bi-sex, flat-feet, the result of a lover who beat her, but she's convinced she was born wrong—so what can poor Buddy do?

"That stringy blonde next to her would be quite pretty if she'd bathe regularly. She hails from up North where she got religion. She preached the Four-Square Gospel for Aimee until she was thrown out of the Temple for using the dressing rooms for odd purposes."

"You mean she's queer?"

"Divinely so, dearie," said Buddy, and rubbed the moonstone against his cheek. "Jackie, for heaven's sake, bring us some gin and ginger ale."

At six thirty, Ken drove the Rolls into the garage. Kari greeted him at the patio entrance.

"Missee Lowell waits for you in the music room," he said.

The gin had been fuming in Ken's head. He had driven

at breakneck speed through Glendale to Flintridge, pursued by a demon thought. While he sat drinking with Buddy Nolan, the ugly idea had slowly filtered into his mind. As Buddy talked, it spread. He was seeing the faintly discerned outlines of reality for the first time.

In Selma, such things had been a joke, a nasty joke. To have believed in their actuality would have stamped one as a dope, a hop-head. The boys back home had been plenty lusty, plenty filthy, too—but in a noisy, reassuring way. They cursed, they were mean, cruel, even disgusting at times. But they were men.

Ken, who had read few novels, who had visited no big cities except for flying trips during training periods, had never conceived the possible existence of such coteries as he had seen grouped about the Rendezvous. While Buddy was talking, as he established with finality the reasons for these attachments of man to man, Ken had not been able to speak. The gin had slowly warmed him. He had viewed the Rendezvous with more acute eyes. As he drank, the certainty grew. These boys and men were . . . the conventional Selma word was "fairies." Buddy, too.

But why did Buddy admit Ken to his confidence? Why this talk of Mr. Lowell?

Not until the moist, foggy evening air struck Ken's cheeks and he had bidden Buddy a calm good-night at the entrance to the school, did Ken have the necessary time for quiet reasoning. He reviewed the events since he had left Selma. He tried to remember what had happened to him.

He had been mildly drunk all the time . . . sometimes with liquor, sometimes with Mr. Lowell's words, some-

times with the beauty with which Mr. Lowell and California surrounded him.

Now, quick with the energy of dancing practise and the shock of gin, he wondered why—why—really why had Mr. Lowell brought him from Texas to California? Of course it was absurd to identify Mr. Lowell with these pallid, languid young men who dressed so smartly and chatted so volubly. They were vapid nobodies. Mr. Lowell, a big business man, did things.

Yet . . . Buddy Nolan did things. Buddy worked hard. He made money. He was famous in Hollywood. Buddy considered these denizens of the Rendezvous as his brethren. And Buddy regarded Mr. Lowell as a god, a paternal god, whose open hand brought riches, comfort and peace.

Wonderingly, Ken thought of Star-ridge, its staff of men. The great house on the hillside was a man's paradise, an Eveless Eden.

What fraternity of men was Ken entering? What were its ramifications? Its code? And in what manner had he been seduced into joining this monastic life?

The Rolls, as Ken considered these questions, entered the driveway and a moment later Ken learned that Mr. Lowell was at home.

From the patio to the balcony were twenty-four ascending steps. Desert trees had been planted on the patio level, a joshua with arms lifted in prayer, a pale green cactus, huge with stiletto-like spikes; a sword cactus with prickling blades spread out in the manner of an opening fan.

Ken strode to the foot of the steps. As he did so, his mind tightened. He could feel the sharp, crackling sensation as of a cap being drawn down upon his head.

He started up the steps. He knew in that moment that

he hated Mr. Lowell. He could see through it all. The horrible old man was spidery. He sat inverted in the midst of this, his web, and lured innocent boys into his gaping maw. He had already taken Ken from his home, from his friends—not through any unselfish devotion, but for purposes scarcely to be mentioned even to one's self. He had already outwitted Ken. The significance of that night in Malibu became clearer and clearer as Ken ascended the steps.

Midway, he halted. He must not fail to let the old man know that he was no fool. He must go straight to him now and say—

But what could he say to Mr. Lowell? That, as in a dream, he had gone to Malibu, as in a dream he had experienced a new emotion, one so intangible that he could not tell what had passed between himself and the old man?

As Ken hesitated on the steps, the organ responded to a gentle touch. A pastoral melody, flute-like, a shepherd inviting his flock to share the shadow of a cliff, an old, old melody, derived from some ancient Grecian theme, drifted down from the music room.

Ken listened as he entered the balcony. He stood motionless in the music room loft.

Mr. Lowell was dressed in a black velvet robe. His white arms, bare to the shoulder, moved in the slow rhythm of the plaintive tune. His gray Van Dyck seemed white in the brilliant overhead light.

Ken stood still—listened.

The melody ended.

Without turning, Mr. Lowell spoke.

"I know that is you, Kenneth."

"Yes, Mr. Lowell."

"This song I just played was for you."

He rose, smiling, and advanced toward Ken. He resembled an ancient philosopher approaching one of his pupils, Socrates greeting a Spartan youth come to Athens to study life and lore at his feet.

"I am glad, dear boy, that you have enjoyed yourself," said Mr. Lowell. "Mr. Pawne tells me you are studying dancing."

"Yes—I've limbered up swell. Won't be long before I'll be ready with a real routine."

"Have you made any new friends?"

"No."

"Not one?"

"Buddy Nolan."

"He is a splendid fellow. Ah, yes . . . I remember him very favorably."

"We went to the Rendezvous together this afternoon."

"The Rendezvous?" Mr. Lowell's eyes narrowed. Ken's heart pulsated more rapidly.

"It's a place where a lot of boys go."

"But how did you get there?"

"I drove the Rolls."

"Mr. Pawne let you drive the Rolls?"

"Why, yes. I asked him myself."

Mr. Lowell had quickly crossed the room to the organ. He touched a button. "It isn't your fault, Ken, but I prefer that you do not visit places like the Rendezvous. Of course you were entirely innocent in the matter, but Buddy Nolan should not have taken you there. What did he say to you?"

"Nothing." A lump grew in Ken's throat.

"You must have talked about something."

"We did. He pointed out different people—"

"I thought so. Mr. Pawne—" Mr. Lowell called through the window. Mr. Pawne was scurrying across the patio, his patent-leather shoes glistening in the pale straw glow of the lamps.

"Come right up, Mr. Pawne," Mr. Lowell ordered crisply. He turned and faced Ken. "You are not to associate with anyone in Nolan's school. If he persists in talking to you about anything other than business, I shall have to send you elsewhere."

Mr. Pawne, thoroughly aware that something was wrong, entered. "What is it, Mr. Lowell?"

"I thought I told you not to let Mr. Gracey out of your sight while I was away."

"I didn't understand you to say exactly that."

"Exactly that? You didn't understand? But those were my words. And you permitted him to drive the Rolls-Royce?"

"I did, Mr. Lowell. He was bored."

"You permitted him to be bored?"

The old man's voice rose to a shrill peak. He glared at Mr. Pawne, who recoiled from his glance. Mr. Lowell placed an arm around Ken's shoulder. "I can see that no harm has come to you. And no harm will come to you in the future."

"I took good care of the car," said Ken apologetically.

"Of course you did. But I shouldn't have cared if you had wrecked it."

Mr. Pawne placed a finger-tip on his lips. "Mr. Lowell, sir," he began, "I'm sorry—"

"I'm sorry too, Pawne," said Mr. Lowell. "Mr. Crofton will give you your check in the morning. Good-night."

As the door closed on Mr. Pawne, Ken blurted a protest against the dismissal of the Englishman. Mr. Lowell cut him short.

"Kenneth," he said, "I don't want anyone around me who knows too little for comfort—or too much." He smiled and patted Ken's hand. "You, my dear, are you happy?"

Ken hesitated. "You aren't?" Mr. Lowell pursued his inquiry. "Why?"

"I'm just . . . just . . ."

"I know . . . lonesome . . . unhappy. Well, tonight we shall entertain you. Go to your room and I shall send Kari to you. He'll dress you properly."

Ken smiled for the first time that evening.

"A party?"

"A little gathering of my closest friends."

WINE was being served.

"This is *Lachrymae Christi*," Mr. Lowell said. "An Italian ship's master brings it to me from San Pedro."

Kari poured and Ken sipped. At this moment, half past ten, he was one of seven men in correct evening attire, who lounged in the solarium next to the game room. Judge Wardell faced Mr. Lowell. The judge was older than his host. His face was shrivelled and he spoke with a thin, crackling voice. He seemed to have something in common with Mr. Lowell, some characteristic expression, as if both thought the same thoughts.

Gaston Powers, the artist, was tall, blond, with a concave face, hollowed by its high cheek bones. He painted murals, and was responsible for the pleasing modernistic effect of the music room. Pierre Fortand, the Hollywood dressmaker, had come with Powers. Pierre created styles more advanced than those of the Rue de la Paix. His circle of fashion devotees rivaled those of Chanel, Worth or Poiret. Privileged to drape rich fabrics on the slender, original forms of the stars, he performed this duty with ceremony and a faraway expression.

Pierre ventured occasionally into the realm of interior decorating. He indulged a rare and exotic flair for personality in rooms, as a result of which Hollywood was blooming with such salons and bedchambers as no one but Pierre could imagine.

Strange to say, Pierre was an unkempt young man with ragged fingernails and a sloppy collar. He complained that he never had time to dress properly. His only diversion, he said, was an evening at La Lowell's.

Mr. Crofton, Mr. Lowell's secretary, was admitted to the circle as an equal. Of a good Kansas family, rich in wheat, Mr. Crofton had sprouted into Mr. Lowell's life one day in Paris, a day when Mr. Lowell quite mysteriously lost a highly paid secretary. Mr. Crofton's predecessor had married, causing Mr. Lowell to give him his congé, quite as peremptorily as he had just dismissed Mr. Pawne. Mr. Crofton had met Mr. Lowell in a gambling house, where he had tossed his last sou beneath a croupier's rake. He proposed to work out a loan from Mr. Lowell, acting as his secretary without pay until he could earn ninety thousand francs in credits.

That was ten years before, in 1912; and Mr. Crofton, who had studied at Chicago, Columbia and the Sorbonne and who could speak eleven languages, was still Mr. Lowell's secretary.

Mr. Crofton was a little larger than Mr. Pawne, his erstwhile assistant. He averred that his parents were in the Social Register, although no one took the trouble to investigate the truth of this assertion. He knew everyone, everywhere and frequently talked about the time he had danced with Queen Victoria of Spain during a passage of the Mediterranean. He was invaluable to Mr. Lowell, who, being a Texan, was frequently at a disadvantage in certain of the higher social circles.

Gregory Gregg, the poet, completed the number of those present. He was very tall, dark, with curly black hair which rambled about a brachycephalic head exactly as a

poet's hair should ramble. He had just recited his newest poem, "Nostalgia," as Kari began to serve the *Lachrymae Christi*.

Gregory Gregg was, despite his coloring, soft-voiced and mousey. Had he had a less dominant mother, he might have become, thought Mr. Lowell, a notion salesman in a department store.

However, his mother had desired a poet in the family and she had had her wish. He was now inditing an ode to Bacchus who, poor sprite, had been driven from the rich hillside vineyards of California to dismal tenement rooms, where his devotees concocted potent libations to a god in disgrace.

Ken sat amid these guests on a high, square chrome and leather chair. He was flushed with the liquor and rather uncomfortable.

"Play something for us, La," Pierre Fortand suggested. "Something in the midsummer mood, '*L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, s'il vous plaît.' The others chimed in with requests for this composition, and that.

"I'll play," said Mr. Lowell, "if you'll all promise to drift away. Because the Judge is here tonight is no reason for formality. He has, in a manner of speaking, taken the veil. Haven't you, Minerva?"

The Judge coughed dryly. "In the code of the Greeks, I am learned—" he snapped. The others, except Ken, laughed.

"That's all I wanted to know," chirped Gregory Gregg. "I shall write a sonnet to swooning Justice . . . or should I say Justicia?"

"You should," replied Judge Wardell. "Indeed—" he sipped the wine—"I sometimes find the gown I wear in

court a little too drab for my taste. I should prefer scarlet —to match my disposition."

Then he winked broadly— "This is all," he added, "*entre nous.*"

"Bored?" Gregory Gregg asked Ken. Mr. Lowell was entering the music room.

"Why should I be bored?" Ken replied.

"Your eyes lack lustre; you have said nothing since dinner."

"I don't know what to say."

"Come, chat with me. I want to hear you talk. Perhaps the garden will put you in the right mood."

Mr. Lowell was playing softly; sobbing tones barely heard in the hushed night. A stone seat faced a mocking Pan in the formal garden, which one reached by means of narrow steps down the side of Star-ridge. Ken sat beside Gregory Gregg.

"I'd like to be your friend," said Gregg.

Ken was unaffected by the music or by the sweet fragrance of the summer flowers.

"Understand me," the poet said. "I mean a true friend. You see, I'm still enough of an *ingénue* to know how you feel tonight. This is your *début*, isn't it?"

"You mean—?"

"I mean, this is the first time you've met La's friends face to face."

"Yes."

"Do you find yourself in harmony with them?"

"Do you mean, do I like them?"

"No—I mean—it's so hard, Kenneth, to say what I mean."

"I don't get you."

"That's because you are not sufficiently sensitive yet. You're too young. You haven't awakened. When you have chosen a career and understand yourself fully, you'll appreciate these lovely days and nights, this freedom from worry. La tells me you're to be a dancer. You are finely built and graceful. When you learn to dance with your mind as well as with your feet, you will find a happy rhythm in your life. Now if you will permit me to analyze you a bit further, you are trying and trying vainly to understand what we are, and why."

Ken chuckled. "You talk just like Mr. Lowell." He tossed his head in the direction of the music room.

"I do. He and I are old . . . friends. Nothing deeper than friendship, of course. We both love beauty. He is playing that organ now because he wants to create beauty. He is no longer young as you are. It's sweet to be young enough not to know and to be saddened by the fear of too much knowing. Listen . . . isn't it beautiful?"

The music sobbed, sighed, ended.

"Kenneth, learn to accept yourself such as you are. Face it. If you don't—I—I'm afraid for you—"

"But I—"

"You can't understand. I know." He stopped short. The night was very still. A faint, cool breeze sprang up. Gregory Gregg brushed back his long, black hair.

"For your own sake, Kenneth, stay with us. If you don't—you'll be very unhappy—tragedy may even come into your life."

Kenneth nervously turned away.

"Do you believe me?" Gregg asked.

Kenneth could not reply.

"If you do—" Gregg continued, "stay with La." Gregg

caught one of Ken's hands in his own. "We'll shake on it, shall we?"

Ken smiled. "Yes," he said.

It was just twelve when Ken guided the Rolls down the steep grade toward Glendale. As he reached the boulevard, he took a deep breath of the fresh night air. Thank God, he was out of the house.

Exactly what had happened, he wasn't sure. He had sat talking with Gregg for a time. They had invaded the house for a drink. Ken had told Gregg he would go below and get Kari to mix some highballs.

On the stairs sat Mr. Crofton and Gaston Powers. They were drunk and giggled at the sight of Ken leading Gregg to the kitchen.

No one was there. Kari, they decided, had gone to bed. Ken opened innumerable cupboards and ransacked the ice box in a search for a drink. He was about to apologize for his inability to find anything, when Gregg asked him not to bother.

"I don't need another drink," he said. "I'm glad there isn't any more. I've talked truth. We mustn't talk truth. It's dangerous."

He smiled. "I like you, Kenneth," he said. "When I first saw you, I thought you were just another Lowell type. But you're not."

"La, you know, isn't especially good for everyone. He's like a diet of caviar, grouse and plum pudding. You must gain perspective, be amused and amusing if you'd survive. And I'd like to see you survive."

Kenneth rather liked the poet. He wasn't annoying. He seemed sincere.

"La Lowell is high priestess of a curious cult, Kenneth . . . a great man—in his way. He weaves enchantments, casts spells, delivers incantations. One must be very young or very strong to resist him. And never weak. He is a curious mixture—devil and god. No ordinary mortal can combat him."

"You've got me wrong, Gregg," Ken said. "I'm not a weak one."

"I hope not—" Gregg's eyes sparkled. "At least be strong enough to be practical. Let him pay you well, as he has paid many others . . . Pierre, for instance."

"Did he put Pierre in business?"

"Brought him from Paris."

For a moment, Kenneth felt a curious resentment against Mr. Lowell, as if Pierre Fortand had no right to be in Star-ridge now that he was there. He had been sitting on the kitchen table. He rose.

"Where are you going?" Gregg asked.

"To find Kari. I need a drink." He did not consider why he went downstairs, instead of up. This he did, however, passing his own bedroom and going straight to Mr. Lowell's.

He did not knock. He opened the door of the dressing room.

"Who's that?" cried a voice. Pierre Fortand slammed an inner door. Ken stood his ground. The inner door opened. Ken thought he saw Mr. Lowell lying on the bed. Fortand came into the dressing room.

"He's a little drunk. Passed out, I think. I'm taking care of him."

"Can I help?"

"No. And get out of here and stay out—do you hear?"

Hollywood was quiet. At Vine Street and the Boulevard, an all-night drug store was open. Ken pulled up at the curb and entered.

At the fountain, he ordered a bromo-seltzer. He was decidedly tight now. That was why his ideas were so muddled, why he couldn't reasonably explain his flight from Star-ridge to Hollywood.

"It's fate, that's what it is," he heard a woman's low-pitched voice and felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned. Anita Rogers stood beside him.

"Hello," he greeted her. "Have a soda on me?"

"No, thanks."

"What brought you out so late?"

"A mad desire to find you, sweetie."

"How'd you know I'd be here?"

"I didn't. I wanted to meet someone I knew; and this seemed the most likely place. It's so all-fired lonesome living by myself." She sniffed. "You've been nipping, haven't you?"

"Party."

"Where?"

"Star-ridge. Awfully dull."

"You'd better not hit it up so much. It'll ruin your dancing."

He looked at her more closely. She was prettier than most girls, not fleshy, rather slim, with brown hair, understanding eyes and a quiet smile.

"Say," she said suddenly, "can you take me for a breath of air? Have you got a car?"

"Sure. Where shall we go?"

"Let's go down to the beach, shall we?"

"Okay."

She marvelled at the Rolls-Royce. "I used to dream I'd ride in one of those things one of these days. Gee, it's swell to be rich."

"Meaning me?"

"Listen, you got plenty."

"I don't own a cent. Everything I have, even my clothes, belongs to someone else; I haven't even earned the money in my pocket. A Jap house boy puts twenty dollars in my pants every morning."

"Brother," she begged, "where is that Jap? He can put twenty dollars in my pants any time. Why, I'm living on twenty bucks a month so's I can buy me a new dance routine."

"You been on the stage?"

"If you call it that. I was in small-time vaudeville for a while. I slipped one day on a banana peel and nine whiskey sours; and I haven't had a job since."

"Where do you live?"

"In a two-by-four down around Vermont."

"Going back on the stage?"

"Yes, when you stop cross-examining me and my back kicks come back and I can afford some new costumes and when I find a new partner as good as you are."

"I'll work with you."

"You mean that, babe? Hm—no you won't. I know your kind."

"My kind—?" Ken stole a sidelong glance at her.

"You're in the dough, kid. Keep outa vaudeville. It's only heartbreaks, hot cakes and cold hotel rooms."

"But maybe we could form a big-time team," Ken said.
"You have experience. I've got long legs."

"No, no—not you."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to spoil you, child."

All the way to Santa Monica Ken argued with her. "When you're sober, you'll realize a combination of you and me'd be impossible. You're a fresh youngster—I'm an old bat."

"Old?"

"In experience, I'm old as old Cleopatra. And you know how long ago she took an asp to lunch."

"What?" asked Ken, naively.

She patted his cheek and laughed.

Ken recognized the pagodas of the Japanese Gardens on the palisade above the coast road. The ocean lay flat as a silken coverlet. Because Anita Rogers was a woman, he felt he could talk to her.

"I'm not having as good a time as you think," he confided. "Did you ever hear of La Lowell?"

"Who's she?"

"He. A rich old man, who's made millions in oil and silver."

"So that's the one you're living with?"

"Yes."

"You wouldn't do that now, would you, cutie?"

The car rolled across the pavement to the beach.

"What'd you mean by that crack?" he asked as he applied the brakes and switched off the lights.

"Nothing you'd understand."

"Say, what do I look like? Do I look dumb?"

"Simple-minded." She laughed. "No—you're a kid, from the country . . . a sap."

He suggested a walk along the beach. Just beyond a

path down the palisade were rocks. She picked her way to a natural opening in the black cliff. The surf splashed and rolled between the beach stones on which they walked. In the darkness, they found a comfortable natural seat, a low, flat rock.

"I've been most everywhere, kid," she said. "I thought I had you figured but I'm wrong."

She lighted a cigarette.

"What's this Lowell guy like?"

"He's wonderfully generous. But I can't figure him the way you can't figure me."

"So he's the one that's made you so shy. Tell me—you're not 'queer,' are you?"

Ken's "No" was gruff and decisive.

"Then put your arm around me, I'm chilly."

He obeyed.

"Haven't you got a drink with you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Then I'll have to get warm some other way."

Her head fell on his shoulder. Her hair was fragrant with a musky scent, as the wind drove it in a caress against his cheek. His hand dropped over her shoulder, so that his fingers barely felt the curve of her breast.

"I'm glad I found you," she said. "I know what's ailing you. You need a woman around once in a while. A goofy old gent like this papa of yours means no good to you."

"How do you know?"

"Mama's wise, little man. She's lived. And she hasn't been in Buddy Nolan's school for four hard weeks without guessing right once in a while."

Ken's eyes followed the long line of foam.

"It'd be a shame if you let popsy-wopsy change you over."

"Why do you keep hammering at that sort of thing?"

"Jimmy Smith. He told me you were being fattened for slaughter, that is, if you haven't taken the veil already."

The phrase recalled Judge Wardell's remark. Ken had not understood what the Judge had meant when he boasted that he had "taken the veil."

"Exactly what does that mean?" he asked Anita.

"Letting your hair down, camping, and all the rest."

"I don't get you."

"I'm glad. Why, I even think you're a fall guy. Ain't it the truth?"

"No."

"Honey, I'm willing to save you. Not for these glad rags you wear, nor for the Rolls over there . . . but because nice little Nita liked you the minute she saw you."

She straightened up. "I'm the kind of gal who isn't too proud to tell the truth. I was afraid of you because the gang had you bracketed as trade. I didn't want to get a cold turn-down. That's bad for the ego and I've got to have an inflated ego or I'm flat as a glass of stale beer."

Her hand roamed over his smooth cheek to his hair.

"Wanta dance with me? On the stage?"

"I'd love to," Ken said.

"It's okay with me, if you'll—" Her voice trailed away, but the implications concealed in its tone were plain. She placed a hand at the back of his head and drew his lips to hers.

She kissed him. At that moment, the wind shifted . . . a damp, cold breeze cut across the water to the land. Ken shivered.

"What's the matter? Cold?"

"I'm tired, I guess."

The color in her cheeks faded. Her eyes were dull brown.

"Okay with me, pal. Let's go home."

The Rolls-Royce raced back to Hollywood. They barely spoke again.

At her door, he pressed her hand lightly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"About what?"

"Don't you know?" Her laugh pealed high. She turned and ran into the courtyard.

For a moment he wanted to follow. He opened the door of the car, then closed it.

"Good-night," he called. She did not answer.

On the way home, he felt ill at ease. He placed the car in the garage very quietly. He descended steps to the bedroom entrance. He opened his door.

A dim light burned. Silhouetted against it was the grotesque figure of Mr. Lowell. He was dressed in what appeared to be a dressing gown, but which was really a Japanese robe, the elaborately brocaded, fantastic, mediæval costume of a Samurai. Heavy silks, rigid with the weight of overlaid panels of metallic cloth, lent a bizarre quality to the costume. Mr. Lowell, tall, his gray beard making him seem a figure out of Felician Rops, swayed.

He pointed a finger at Ken. His mouth, half open, tried to speak human words. But he was so drunk that he could only bleat—a goat in the form of a man.

MR. LOWELL swayed again so that Ken thought he would fall.

"Where have you been?" he finally cackled.

"Out riding."

"With whom?"

"One of the school kids."

Ken noticed that one of Mr. Lowell's eyes drooped. He was about to put an arm around the old man's shoulder and guide him to his own room, when Mr. Lowell snapped:

"A girl?"

"A girl," Ken replied, a note of defiance in his voice.

Mr. Lowell wrested himself away from Ken's embrace. He uttered an inchoate sound and his face became black. Saliva drooled from his lips and over his beard.

"I just happened to meet her in a drug store, that's all," Ken explained.

"You talked to her—you!" Mr. Lowell's hand was doubled into a fist.

"Why, of course, I did," Ken said, honestly.

"About me!" shrilly cried Mr. Lowell.

On the mantel was a French clock, a Watteau shepherdess holding aloft a disc, on the face of which toy hands of gold pointed to the minutes and hours. Mr. Lowell seized the disc from the hands of the shepherdess and hurled it at Ken.

"You can't talk about me!" Mr. Lowell screamed.

"No—I didn't," Ken lied. He stooped and picked up the shattered clock.

"Get out of here! You belong back in Texas, in the fields, shovelling cow dung. You're not fit to come into my house. Look what you've done to it. Tracked mud into it—"

"I've done nothing. I went for a ride, that's all."

"My friends were not good enough for you. No, you had to pick up some whore and take her in my car. I'll have Crofton sell it tomorrow."

"But I—"

"Don't explain. I've made a mistake. I wanted to be proud of you."

Ken quietly asked: "As proud as you are of Pierre Fortand?"

Mr. Lowell's eyes opened. His mouth dropped wide.

"Kenneth, you get out of here tonight, before I kill you!"

"All right."

"No one questions me here in Star-ridge. This is my castle. Here, I can do as I please. Men such as you met here tonight wouldn't dare say what you have just said to me."

Ken stood motionless.

"The trouble, Kenneth, is in you. You are neither fish nor fowl. You are a country lout—fit only to associate with pigs."

Ken's fists were clenched.

"You despise the beauty of the only love that matters. You'd rather wallow in a cesspool than live in a palace. Go ahead . . . go." Mr. Lowell swayed, moved slowly toward the bed.

"I don't want you," he said. "Get out!"

He collapsed on the bed. Ken turned away and left the room.

In the morning, Ken asked Johnson to drive him to the School of Terpsichore.

"Sure was some party you had las' night," commented the chauffeur. "That dressmaker fellow slept all night in the bath tub and Kari, he tells me some other man fell down the garden steps and lay in the bed of pansies all night."

Ken told Johnson he had slept in the servant's lodge.

"Tain't for you to let Mister Lowell know that," Johnson smiled.

Ken did not reply. His mind was busily trying to find escape from his dilemma. For he knew that he could not, nor did he want to, remain at Star-ridge.

Listlessly he worked in the classes. Just before noon he met Anita.

"Hello, Romeo," she laughed. "Was that you serenading outside my window all night long?" She laughed mockingly and Ken flushed.

"How about having lunch with me?" he asked.

"What for?"

"I want to work with you."

"Sure 'nough?" she asked.

"Sure 'nough, sister," Ken's voice warmed to enthusiasm.

"I'll be there," said Anita.

Sitting opposite him in the Gypsy tea-room on Western Avenue, Anita Rogers talked about herself. She was, she said, lazy. She didn't mind admitting she had tried everything. "I've modelled gowns up in Frisco. I worked as a

masseuse in Seattle, as a waitress right here in Hollywood. Guess the trouble with me is I'm a good-time Jennie. Only thing that stops me now is poverty."

He noticed her cheap, flimsy dress, the square onyx ring on her finger, her spit-curl which fluttered in the electric fan's breeze.

"Olive and cream cheese sandwich," she ordered. "I need a few pounds here and there for my nude. I'm a sketch right now from not eating regular.

"Y'see, I cut out the rough stuff, kid, when I got cancelled last year. I'd taken it on the chin here and there, being a sap more often than not. A cluck who could hoof fell for little Nita's technique and paid for an education in dancing. The first year out, playing the sticks, was great. Then Gus walked out on me, and I teamed up with a dame. That finished me. I never could stand women. I'm a man's gal. So I began to hit the bottle in such places as Walla Walla and Devil's Gulch, or what have you. Now I'm living on a little insurance income. Do you think you wanna take a chance with me? Won't you be going off to New York or Europe with your old boy?"

Ken smiled. "That's washed up," he said.

"You're walking out on him?"

"He kicked me out—last night."

She said nothing for a long time. He lighted a cigarette.

"Forgive me for asking this question," Anita Rogers said, "but have you any money of your own? You know what you said last night about the valet filling your pockets."

"I have enough to last for a few weeks."

"Boy," she breathed. She kissed her finger tips, then traced the kiss on his lips. "I like you. You *are* regular.

We'll work together—hard as hell. And what's more, I'll get booking for our act if I have to dance horizontally for every agent on the Coast. Come on, let's go!"

The day was unbearably long. At four o'clock, classes over, Anita proposed that she and Ken work together for an hour. She wanted him to watch her old vaudeville routine.

He sat on a bench in the bare practise hall. She wore a pair of shorts and a jersey silk shirt and danced with verve as he beat time with the palms of his hands. While she kicked and pirouetted and did a Russian dance, Ken watched the shadows lengthen through the high windows.

Late afternoon. A new adventure was beginning. He wished that he were not suffering the pangs of conscience. He wished he could freely forget the immediate past. He worried, fearing he was being unjust to Mr. Lowell . . . who, after all, had done him no apparent harm.

"You're not paying attention," Anita said, interrupting her dance. "Your rhythm is 'way off."

"I've got to talk to you," he said. "You did all the talking this noon."

"What's on your mind?"

"I ought to telephone Star-ridge. I haven't got a pair of sox or a handkerchief in the world, except in that house."

She regarded him with a patent air of disbelief.

"Why don't you go back there tonight, talk it all over, and make up your mind?"

"No, I'm through," said Ken.

They were leaving the school together when Buddy Nolan called Ken.

"I'll run along," said Anita. "You better settle with Buddy. He's probably heard from Old Man River."

In Buddy's office sat Mr. Lowell. His face was white, his beard seemed whiter. Buddy excused himself and left Ken with the old man.

"Sit down, Kenneth," Mr. Lowell said. Kenneth sat down, completely calm.

"I came to ask your forgiveness," Mr. Lowell spoke slowly, as if a trace of bitter water lingered in his mouth. "I was drunk last night. Where did you sleep?"

"In the servant's quarters," Ken replied.

"I came myself to get you. I want you to come home."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lowell. I can't go with you."

So quietly did this statement come that Mr. Lowell did not take it for the emphatic refusal which it was. He spluttered and could not reply.

"I thank you for everything, sir," Ken continued. "I'd like the clothes you bought for me."

"Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stay here in Hollywood."

"I see." The old man picked up his hat. "Very well, I'll have Johnson deliver your clothes to you. Where shall I have them sent?"

"Send them here, sir. And thank you very much."

Mr. Lowell, who did not seem nearly so tall as on that day when Ken sat beside him in the Packard driving through the state of Texas, left the room, closing the door behind him.

XVII

AS the motor-bus rolled into the San Bernardino valley, Ken rejoiced. Clear cool morning air swept down from the mountain wall dry and free. The warm tonic sun revealed faraway vistas, firs and pines cresting above the ever-changing skyline, long deep green citrus groves, sand seas upon which hardy grape shoots lay in long lines to the desert horizon. Soon midmorning, it would be hot enough for laziness; if he could be successful, he would have the leisure to enjoy these Southland days. If he could be successful, if he could earn enough, he would ride and swim and dance until, exhausted, he would laze in the languorous sun.

Anita sat curled up beside him, in the wide leather seat. She had yielded to his insistence that they take the early bus to San Bernardino. She had been up most of the night and would have preferred to sleep until ten. Ken regretted now his selfish impulsiveness. She had done so much for him; she had steadied him, given him self-confidence and an understanding of the comradeship and self-denial which is the casual gift of every member of the theatrical fraternity. She was, in Ken's mind, a great pal. Gazing at her now as she lay cuddled up and dozing, he was reminded of the many long hours and profitless days she had shared with him. When he met her, she was sailing ahead, serenely contented with her lot, lonely perhaps, but certainly a victor in the struggle to defeat her own weaknesses. Then

she had joined him whole-heartedly in his ambition. He had only to mention his unwillingness to study longer at Buddy Nolan's. She had quit the ornate School of Terpsichore with him. She had even changed her mode of living to suit him. Day after day he had routed her out of her bungalow court apartment with a seven-o'clock-in-the-morning 'phone call. He had lived nearby, in a shabby apartment hotel absurdly named the Palacio del Oro, and they would meet at the Owl for coffee and cake.

Then, day after day, from nine until five, at Delaney's, they had struggled to overcome the inherent and rebellious unwillingness of their flesh, torturing their bodies in order to dance as they thought capricious booking agents and later the equally fickle public would prefer to see them dance.

Anita, it had been, Ken conceded, who drove away the fear that he had acted hastily and ungratefully toward Mr. Lowell. She had also prevented him from returning the one-hundred dollar bill in the same envelope in which Mr. Crofton had sealed it that day when Johnson had delivered Ken's clothes. Ken had wanted to write a note to Mr. Lowell, but Anita had advised him to send a single page of note paper upon which would be written only the word "Thanks" and his name.

Thus that episode ended. Gone were the fabulous glories of Star-ridge; gone the silk-covered bed, the exotic foods, vintage wines, the terrifying beauty of the organ. Gone that puzzling dread which had finally enveloped Ken and which was to be replaced by an almost equally puzzling restlessness until Anita restored his faith in himself.

Anita included, of course, the dance. The dance blossomed and grew ripe. He was made for it. It transformed

him. Now Anita had poured much of it into the mould of her old vaudeville act. She had taught him the difficult Russian acrobatic steps. With the occasional aid of Peter Delaney, she had taught him her soft-shoe routine. And she had taught him the waltz.

It was marvelous to execute his own high-kick specialty, his own creation, a dance he alone could perform, thanks to the unusual limberness of his legs as well as their length. That was the number that would, Delaney said, "make" him. But the waltz was a new experience.

In the beginning, when he first rehearsed the waltz with Anita, he decided he was too awkward for ball-room dancing. The long arc of their steps, the break in which she soared up and away from him, the intricacies of the ever-changing figures; and then the slow embarrassing undulation with which the dance concluded, when, body to body, they danced as one—a dance, in short, in which his dashing fiery youthfulness was forced to yield to suave and surefooted experience—this he could not do, he said.

But she made him do it. For three weeks he did nothing else. At last, when their costumes came, when she was slim and rich in cloth of gold and he was elegantly slender in his tuxedo and they danced to a Paul Whiteman recording and the late autumn afternoon light was growing dim, he knew what it was to dance—as Anita said—divinely. In that moment, twilight descending, he was comfortable again. No remote fears, no obscure problems, no rising tide of anger . . . instead something precious, like happiness.

That night Anita had not wanted to work. But Ken had insisted and they had danced the waltz again at Delaney's. At the door of her bungalow, she had seized his head, and

his lips had felt the swift sharp bruising contact of hers and her teeth had pushed aside his yielding lips and had met his.

"I'm sorry—" she suddenly had cried. "This will spoil everything now."

He had felt the need for frankness and had said quietly: "I don't see why."

"Go home," she had cried. "Hurry—please, before it's too late."

The next morning, she had had a headache. He had wondered if she had been drinking. She was fond of him, he decided. And he was fond of her. They would be very successful together, he had thought. They had dined together that night and he had tried to explain that he earnestly wanted to laugh and to play and to be gay with her. But how could he? His money was nearly gone. If they did not get an engagement soon, he would go home to Selma. And a return to Selma could destroy him utterly, now that he had tasted the joys of life in Hollywood.

She had apparently misunderstood him. She had thought that he felt it was her duty to get an engagement and that she had failed.

"We'll be working by the week after next," she had said harshly.

How she had obtained the booking at San Bernardino, he did not know. She merely had told him that she had taken three days at the valley town, five dollars a day and bus fare.

"We won't make a cent," she had added. "But you'll find out if you are a dancer or not. I'm betting you are."

"I'm a dancer all right."

"And not much more. Listen to me, youngster. I've

taken more from you than I'm used to taking." She had stopped abruptly, had laughed and had said: "Well, never mind. It all falls under the heading of art."

"I'm at a disadvantage," Ken had said.

"How come?"

"If you'd spent your whole life except for seventy-seven days in the middle of Texas—"

"How do you know it's seventy-seven days," she had asked.

"I counted 'em."

"You would." She had brusquely patted his cheek. "Come on—on with the dance."

Women, Ken told himself, were like that. They apparently expected a man to make a play for them. The trouble with him was that he didn't know where to begin with Anita. Back home in Selma, things were different. The girls were all someone's sister or daughter. At parties, with alkie and water added, things sometimes did happen. Tall tales were told in the abandoned frame house on Council Street about happenings after dances, football games and meetings of the Selma High Social Club. Ken had heard these stories. He did not always believe them. He had seen little with his own eyes. And an influence more powerful than his own will seemed to restrain him from participating in the more daring "binges" of the less restrained high school crowd.

In Selma, he had met no one like Anita. Her complete independence, the carefree attitude she assumed, her not infrequent stories of her old life in various parts of the west, made it difficult for Ken to judge her. If she had been younger and simpler he might have wondered

whether her interest in him was wholly that of the artist who chooses a dancing partner only because he is talented. That a woman of twenty-eight should care to be loved by a boy of seventeen was quite beyond Ken's comprehension.

He thought her "nice." She was, he believed, "attractive." His own fastidious nature made him displeased with her occasional carelessness in dress. She would appear at Delaney's clad in mannish slacks and a rough khaki shirt, with hair tossing this way and that as she danced. Her figure was trim enough but her face was unevenly moulded, puffed here and there, the aftermath of bygone drinking bouts, hard lovemaking and sometimes very little food.

Ken, of course, did not consciously criticize Anita's appearance. He thought her "nice."

This morning he thought her especially "nice." She was animate, warm, helpful, part of the ever-moving panorama, more to be treasured than these unchanging trees and mountains and patches of sage-covered sand. Because of her, this was the morning of a great day—his first day as a professional dancer, his first step toward fame.

He recalled the last time he had been driven over this foothill boulevard, Mr. Lowell beside him, Johnson's broad back curving above the pane of the glass separating chauffeur from passengers. He was much happier today. He had succeeded in surviving nearly four months of Hollywood, months of hard work, life between the drab walls of a furnished bedroom. The great and the near great had passed him by. He was not yet one of them. They had succeeded because they had worked hard, had defied their own weaknesses. He too—he thought this morning—would win in the same selfless way.

She sat up.

"What are you thinking about?" She smiled knowingly.

"I don't know."

"Me?"

"No."

"You look so serious. Relax, Ken, if you want to get anything out of this try-out."

"I'm not nervous."

"Then why so all-fired grim? Listen, buddy, we're not working in the Follies yet. We're not even playing the Orpheum in L.A."

She took his hand. "Maybe," she said, "if you was a bit more human, you'd feel better."

In the Mission House, they rented two rooms separated by an ell in the corridor of the shabby little hotel.

"In my language this is a dump," Anita said as she unpacked her bag. "And I let you get away with this double room stuff because you looked too innocent for words downstairs at the desk; and I'm not going to San Quentin for corrupting the morals of a minor. But we coulda taken a twin bedroom and saved seventy-five cents a night. I won't bite you and if I do the marks won't show later than nine the next morning."

They couldn't find the theatre. Its narrow lobby hid between a market and an automobile salesroom, "looking like nothing but a very old vacant lot," said Anita. They found their names on the house-board. They were one of three acts, "Mme. Blanco, the famed Swiss Sharpshooter; Prince Zarah, the International Mystic; and the Metropolitan Dance Team Par Excellence, Rogers and Gracey."

"Gooda-goda," barked Anita, "we are next to closing."

"Is that good?" Ken asked.

"When the closing act is Cecil B. De Mille's 'King of Kings,' it couldn't be worse. I should have done a Salome routine and brought your head on-stage in a soup tureen."

The box-office was not yet open. The office door was locked. Back stage they happened upon a wizened, wrinkled old gentleman who announced that he was Sam Anderson, father of Joe Anderson, the house manager.

At last Ken penetrated the mysteries of the theatre. Sam Anderson pointed the way to their dressing-room.

"One room enough?" he asked.

"Plenty," said Anita.

Ken followed her across the gloomy stage to a corridor. She unlocked the door of a narrow frigid cell. Two dressing tables, two chairs, a wardrobe, a barred window.

"Looks like the jail house to me," she said, "but I s'pose it's heaven to you, Buster."

"I like it."

"The orchestra will be here at twelve o'clock," Sam Anderson said. "Got your contracts with you?"

Ken nodded.

"Ed Feinberg will be down, I think," said Anderson.

Anita laughed. "To see us break in? Who told you?"

"He wrote me when he sent Joe the contract."

After the old man had left, Ken asked her who Ed Feinberg was.

"The agent, silly. The man who made us what we are today. I don't think he'll come this far to see us perform. Come, let's get into some practise clothes."

"You first," Ken said.

"Listen here, what do you think I am?" she exploded.

"We got quick changes to make. Get in that corner and slip into your dancing strap; I've got a belt on already. Have to keep one on all the time with hot stuff like you around."

A few minutes later, they had changed into trunks and shirts.

"I never knew how pretty you were," she said.

"The same goes for you, baby," he said.

"You mean that?" She laughed. "Aren't you going a bit too far?"

"You've been wonderful, really wonderful," he said. He took her in his arms. "If we ever get to meaning anything at all in this business, it'll be because you've been so wonderful."

"Those are precious words, precious," she whispered, as she let him kiss her.

XIX VIII CX

HALF the audience was Mexican; the orchestra squeaked through the overture with dismal monotony of tempo and old Sam Anderson was always late on cues—he acted as grip, props and curtain man—yet it was a great opening performance. The audience warmed quickly to the routines of Rogers and Gracey, applauded loudly when Ken let his legs fly high in his specialty. They received four curtain calls after the waltz.

"We peped them up, the tamales, for their Bible lesson," Anita laughed as they dressed. "Boy, it sure feels good to work."

He was naked except for his strap and he rubbed his lean body with alcohol, then powdered himself.

"If you went on that way," Anita said, "you'd wow 'em all the way to Mexico City."

He had lost his shyness. The stage, sparkling lights, music and applause, was stimulating dry wine. He stepped into his street clothes, bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"Let's do something," he suggested.

"I'm for celebrating. Let's see—we each make one fifty profit on the day. I'll chip in and buy a bottle of gin with you."

"I'd rather not drink," he said.

"Not even a special Anita cocktail? Here—" she tossed him a dollar bill.

He found Sam Anderson at the stage door. "You can get gin at the corner drug store," said the old man.

"Where can I buy some flowers?"

"Right next door. The market is open until eleven."

He made his purchases and light-heartedly hurried back to the theatre. As he opened the dressing-room door, he saw the black overcoat of a man. He entered. The bulbous-nosed ruddy-cheeked Jew who faced him was Ed Feinberg.

"I was down to Palm Springs and dropped by to see your act. It's okay," he commented.

"Can you get us more time?"

"Yes . . . and no," he replied.

"I get it," Anita remarked tersely.

"I don't," said Ken.

"This is business," Feinberg said. "I guess Miss Rogers is the business manager of the act, ain't she?"

"Yes," Ken replied.

"You leave it to her." He winked. "She knows how to get dates. You keep on dancing. You're all right, kid."

Ken handed the flowers to Anita.

"Sweet boy." She smiled. "Now don't you go talking about us two, Ed."

"I'm on my way," Feinberg said. "Good luck, anyhow."

"You won't stop over and have a drink with us?"

"I can't. Gotta sleep in L.A. tonight."

"So that's an agent," Ken said as the door closed.

"That's an agent," she agreed. "He took his one buck fifty commission too, the bastard. And more beside."

She tucked his hand under hers and held it tightly against her body as they walked to the hotel.

"Don't you think we oughta rehearse in the morning?" Ken asked.

"What for? Take it easy. Don't wear yourself out," she said. "Feinberg saw us, that counted for more'n I thought. Squeeze that lime into my glass. And drink."

Ken squeezed the lime. "I can't go this stuff much," he said. "It hits the lining of my stomach."

"You'll get use to gin and alkie again if you stay in vaudeville." She sat down on the bed. "Come here, sit beside me."

He sat down.

The room was steeped in the musty odor of an old hotel. Even the bedclothing was impregnated with the dry smell.

"You're a strange boy," she said. "Here we are old friends. This is the first time in history you've sat next to me on a bed."

She slipped a bare arm around his neck and kissed him. He smiled and returned the kiss.

"I like you," he said. "Guess I'm a little afraid of you still."

"You don't have to be, sweet," she said. "I wanna tell you something tonight before it's too late. You've done great things for me. It wasn't so much that I was busted when I met up with you—I still am, for that matter—but you've made me feel full of wim and vigor again. I'm ambitious again. Anyone who ever said Nita Rogers would slave the way I did with you woulda been put out of the kingdom of heaven just on general principles."

"I don't believe you were so bad." He laughed. She smiled and they found themselves kissing. She slipped away from him, poured another drink and drank it.

"You've had me on the wagon, imagine that . . . me!"

She put the glass down. "Let's go to my room," she said. "No use bringing my things in here."

"Let's wait a while," he said. Then he looked up at her and noticed that she was removing her dress. "You can put a newspaper over that table lamp," she was saying. She slipped down into the overstuffed chair. "Pour me another drink, too."

"Don't drink any more," he said.

"A little gin and ginger ale won't hurt me. Don't look so funny about me and help me outa this slip." He still sat on the bed. "Come on."

He rose and poured some ginger ale in her glass.

"There's only one kinda paradise on earth, boy," she said. "When I tell you I've been stuck on you since I saw you, that means a lot. When I tell you I ain't been out with a man in all that time—" The slip dropped to the floor and she tossed it on the table.

"Except Ed Feinberg," she added.

"The agent?"

"You don't s'pose he booked the world famous dance team of Rogers and Gracey without me coming across with a date, do you?"

He hesitated.

"Switch off the lights and cover up the lamp with a paper, hon."

"I don't want to," he said.

"You don't want to?" she repeated with blank astonishment. "Aw, don't be nervous. It won't make any difference one way or another, sweet."

"Nita," he said. "I'm awfully fond of you. You're swell." He tucked her slimness in his arms. "But—"

"What is it?" she looked up. "Oh, I can see it in your face. You don't love me."

"I ought to. I should—"

"But you can't?"

He let her go. His movements had been mechanical. He had not been thinking. Nothing to think about, until she had mentioned Ed Feinberg. Then the coarse features of the agent returned vividly to his mind.

"I . . . we . . . we meet somehow in different ways. I don't know how to explain what I mean," he said. "I love you—I seem to love you for everything you are—everything you are to me."

"Then why?" She changed expression suddenly. "I know. Because this will be your first affair?"

"No—" Deep in his consciousness he discovered the obscure memory of an unforgettable night at Malibu. A shudder shook him. His face became a plastic study in hatred.

"I know," she said.

"How could you?" he cried.

"You hate me . . . that's the real truth, isn't it?"

"Oh, no!"

She turned away. "And I thought I was so wise." She took the last swig of gin raw from the bottle. Then the slip and dress from the table. "What a fool I've been!"

"Where are you going?" he asked her as she opened the door and, still half undressed, entered the corridor.

For a long time Ken stood motionless. He could feel the numbing after-effect of the gin. His thoughts were jerky, broken. He shook his head helplessly. He could not understand why Anita had gone. Slowly an intense deep-rooted urge to find her rose within him. A sere slow pas-

sionate pain made him turn toward the door. He wanted her.

Coldly the pale light in the corridor illumined the dreary walls. He was such a weak fool. What of it? He would be strong. He would renounce his own imaginary scruples and warm himself to her, in love with her, despite everything.

He knocked on the door. No reply. It was unlocked. He entered the room, another drab chamber such as his own. She was not there.

He ran downstairs to the desk.

"Did Miss Rogers leave the hotel?" he asked the drowsy night clerk.

"Ain't seen no one since one o'clock," the man said. "Maybe she slipped out the side way. It's a warmish sorta night, just right for a walk or a—" He winked a drooping eye-lid with almost malicious delight, sighed deeply and went back to sleep.

The waitress was busy at the other end of the cafeteria. "I'm sorry I acted that way last night," Anita said. In the cold morning light, her face was gray and lined.

"This coffee," she added, "will take that taste outa my mouth. It's the ginger ale. I like seltzer water with my gin."

"Where did you go?" he asked.

"For a walk. Found myself in the alley back of the hotel with my dress on my arm. That shows you how nuts I can be."

"You better not drink so much."

"It wasn't the drink," she explained. "At least not entirely."

She took his hand. Hers was cold as ice.

"This is the last time I'll talk this way, boy. I was wrong, dead wrong. We gotta be a success. We mustn't drink. Or love. Or anything like that. Get me?"

The prickling uneasiness which had tortured him during a restless night disappeared.

"I do," he said.

Her face lost its hardness. She looked up with almost wistful longing and the fragment of a tear rose into the corner of her eye. But the tear vanished in a smile and she sipped the coffee before she added: "I'm gonna stick to business, Ken—and it's nobody's business what business. Hey, girlie, pour me another cup of shellac."

Anita was tired. After rehearsal she returned to the hotel and Ken took a walk through the town. In a palm-shaded park he rested. It was noon and workers lay flat on the carpet of grass, while children played ball on the intertwining walks. A pleasant enough spot, Ken thought, hot under the early December sun. He was not entirely comfortable, however. He missed Anita. She had not lunched with him as was their custom and his second day in San Bernardino thus differed from the days that preceded it.

Here was lulling quiet, children laughing, motor cars purring past. He wondered why she had fled from him. Could he have told why he had fled from Mr. Lowell?

I was afraid, he thought. And she is afraid of me. But not for the same reasons. I was afraid because . . . I can't explain why, even to myself . . . because I mixed up the idea of what Mr. Lowell was with what other people thought him to be.

She's maybe afraid I'll be too serious. She's afraid maybe I'll go for her in a big way.

The lean narrow face of Zarah the mind reader rose mistily before Ken's eyes.

"You are thinking of life and love," boomed Zarah's rich resonant voice. His eyes were piercingly black and his skin sallow. Even on this noonday street, he wore his morning dress and his turban.

"I see you walking," he said. "I like to talk to you, young man. You dance so beautifully and you are always so serious."

"You liked my dance?"

"I think you are magnificent." His voice lowered, his lips close to Ken's ear: "In costume, you must be so beautiful."

"In costume?"

"I should like you to visit me in my home in San Diego sometime. I show you a Spanish gown . . . ah, I wore it myself at the Chateau Richard in Van Nuys at the ball last season. A little alteration and it would become you so much better."

"How do you know?"

"La Lowell . . ."

Ken's heart thumped at the name. Zarah was smiling at Ken's embarrassment. "Pierre Fortand, he made my gowns. He told me."

"Told you what?"

"I know, too, you quarrel with him. I do not know him. I only know of him. They say he is very *recherché*; I do not know." Ken was unable to speak. "You will pardon me," continued Zarah, "if I bring back unhappy memories. I am a very terrible mind reader or I would not be

here in San Bernardino. You are a very wonderful dancer. You will go far. Have you had lunch?"

"No," said Ken.

"I know a charming little tea-room nearby; the host is a lovely fellow. Will you be my guest?"

Curious that he should have met an acquaintance of Pierre Fortand's the moment that Anita left him to his own devices! Zarah was, of course, Mexican. Ken decided that Zarah had seen him leave the theatre and had followed him to the park.

He liked Zarah, who had been everywhere . . . from the Faroe Islands to Zanzibar. He liked Bobby Glenn, the handsome platinum blond boy whose Pagan Tea Room seemed strangely incongruous, hiding as it did in the basement of a private house on a side street. Zarah's interest in him, he decided, was quite natural. In show business, as Anita had said, all men are brothers.

He told Anita about his lunch with Zarah later that day. "The old dog." She laughed. "Watch out for him." She was feeling much better, she said. But she would go to bed early—right after the show.

"Try Zarah tonight." She drew the corners of her lips down in a mocking grimace. "Make a date with him."

As they danced the waltz, he saw Zarah's eyes watching him from the wings.

"You are holding me too tight," whispered Anita. He swung about, she flew from his arms in her forever surprisingly bird-like flight. She returned to his arms. He danced close to her again, body arched into body. They began to spin, around, around and around in an intoxicating whirl. As they pivoted off-stage, he managed to brush

his lips upon her cheek. She appeared not to notice and a moment later they were again on-stage, acknowledging the applause. As the curtain fell, he turned. She was gone.

At the stage entrance, on the way to their dressing-room, he saw her. She was talking to a man. In the dim light he could not discern the man's features, but as he turned, he heard his own name.

Ed Feinberg, loose-lipped, heavy browed, a little bald spot at the crown of his broad flat head, appeared.

"Hello, Mr. Feinberg," said Ken.

"Come here, *schlemiebl*. Do you know? You was very good tonight—I think maybe I book you for about four solid weeks through the state. If you keep working very hard and I get good reports, maybe a week or two even in 'Frisco and maybe a club spot in L. A."

"That's great," Ken said, all smiles.

Anita's lips drooped. "Perfect," she said in an expressionless tone.

Her eyes faced Ken's. "I've gotta take a little run-out powder tonight, Kenneth. Mr. Feinberg and I, we got a little jabbering to do about terms and such things—"

"Yeh—I'd like you to chaperone us," said Feinberg, "but I only got a roadster and it ain't got no rumble seat."

"That's okay with me," Ken said. "I got sorta a date with . . . Zarah."

He returned to the hotel at half past two. He had had but one drink. Zarah had passed out and Bobby Glenn was putting him to bed when Ken left the Pagan Tea Room.

The night clerk unlocked the front door for him.

"Miss Rogers home?" Ken asked.

"Oh, yes, sir, since about one o'clock."

He climbed the stairs.

As he crossed the corridor, he made a hasty decision. The only way out, he concluded, was to go to her unexpectedly, catch her when she was off balance, take her by storm, love her plenty, get it over with.

The odor of the corridor revived sensations of the night before. Here was her door. On the other side, a shabby room, a miserable bed. Her body lay there on that bed, her familiar body drawn fine by ceaseless rehearsing. She would be sleeping. He would wake her. She would call, "Who's there?" and he would reply, "Ken," and she would admit him.

With knuckles folded, he lifted his hand to rap.

The blurred voice of Ed Feinberg came indistinctly through the thin wood. "Don't go drinking any more of that gin, doll," the agent was saying. "You can't see where I am now. I'm here, doll, on this chair. That's it. Easy now . . . easy . . . you'll break the chair in two. Here . . . I'll take the glass. There . . . Mm, but you're pretty . . . there."

"Poppa," he heard Anita murmur, "my Eddie, poppa, aw poppa . . . one teenie, weenie one more."

Fingers held in his ears, Ken fled from the corridor and down the stairs.

A glazed lamp . . . a narrow door. Ken, head low, moved straight ahead, walking until he should tire himself out. A Mexican, slant eyes betraying his partially oriental blood, brushed Ken's elbow. Dark street, another glazed lamp, a man standing against the wall urinating.

Ken moved on. A pawn shop, a *farmacia*, another street.

He could feel his young feet aching. He stopped. If he

walked much farther he would lose his way. He laughed bitterly. This, then, was the end of love.

He retraced his steps. The same slant-eyed Mexican moved toward him, passed him. The first glazed lamp shone above a narrow green door. Ahead of him was the second glazed lamp.

From ebony darkness came a woman, blonde, frail, in a scanty black dress. She cut across his path.

"Hello, buddy," she said.

He stopped.

"Lookin' for a good time?"

Her eyes were shot through with blood, sharp lines cut her face, converging at the corners of her mouth. On her lip was a tiny sore.

"No, I'm not." He strode on.

"Guess I made a mistake, Kewpie," she cackled, her words evaporating in a thin high laugh.

Ken's long legs moved in wide strides, but the laugh seemed to follow him, even to the threshold of his hotel.

The motor bus sped westward on the valley road. Soon they would be back in Los Angeles.

"You're no longer a child, darling," Anita said. "I can tell by the way you act."

"I know it," Ken said. "That's why I'm going to tell you I know you had Feinberg in your room the other night."

"And you didn't break down the door?"

"I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I didn't care."

"You lie, you idiot."

"No . . . I'm telling the truth."

Her eyes were dull with leaden despair. "I had to go with him once in L.A. for this San Bernardino date," she confessed. "I did it thinking it was for you and me and if you ever found out, you'd understand. But the other night, I had to, I had to. I guess I'm rotten, that's all."

"Wasn't it because you wanted to get a contract for some more time?"

"No. It was because I wanted to."

"I see."

He looked out of the window. Now that his head was averted, he could not see the subtle shading of the love in her eyes as she looked longingly at him.

"People are built the way they are built," she was saying. "I'm the way I am. You . . . you're the way you are."

"We can't help it, I guess."

She took his hand.

"It'll be great, though, for our act, now that we understand each other."

Her hand dropped slowly to her lap. He said nothing. Her fingers twitched.

"Open the overnight bag, will you, Kennie?"

"What for?"

"I feel as though I could go a slug of rye."

XVIII

ANITA ROGERS considered herself pretty damned hard-boiled. That is to say, she could stand plenty of punishment and still keep smiling. But Ken Gracey got on her nerves.

The fault was as much hers as Ken's. She had no business letting herself in for it. Trouble was, he caught her on a down-beat. Ordinarily, in the old days, she'd never given a tumble to a high school kid. That stuff went when she was fourteen years old up in Watertown, Oregon, when she wanted to know the facts of life and the right name for things and stuff.

Men were—men. Any one of them could do as well as any other, dancing around a Maypole. That was her credo when she left Watertown, dad having hardening of the arteries and softening of the brain all at the same time.

A party girl she was the minute she hit 'Frisco. Up all night every night, cock-eyed plenty, but always feeling good by the next evening when the old merry-go-round would start twirling again.

The high spot in those days when when Ike Rosenstone hired her to model gowns for him at a hundred per because she happened to know where the body was buried and could show its last resting place to Ike's wife. The poor fat-headed cheater flopped over one day with a stroke and Anita found herself out in the cold . . . and it was plenty cold.

A doctor put her in the massage racket. He taught her a few little tricks which came in handy later on, when she was stranded in Seattle and couldn't get a job. She gave a prissy old health board inspector a fancy rub-down and got an official license to pick up a few dollars here and there. She rented a little flat all to herself and chose her customers carefully, preferring men over thirty because their blood ran coolish and she could tame them and enjoy it. Anita learned to avoid husky young Goliaths. One night when she attempted to put a certain college football captain out in the dark after having entertained him with every trick in her repertory, he confused her with the Washington State scrimmage line and broke her collar bone attempting an off-tackle slant for a fourth or fifth touch-down . . . she couldn't remember which. A masseuse with a lame arm was worthless, so Anita's career went from her clavicle to her feet. She became, thanks to Gus, again a good girl and for the first time in her life a dancer, Gus paying the bills.

In several seasons of small time for Pantages and backwoods offshoots of the Orpheum circuit, she developed into a fair performer, especially when she was a little tight. If she went on without a drink, the audience saw a tired girl in a tinselled dress doing her best to keep up with an impatient orchestra. So she drank, moderately, at first.

Gus, who could sing well enough to get by, gave her the air because he preferred an idle life as an old lady's home companion to the insecure and picaresque career of a song and dance man. He decided, too, that Anita was fading and with plenty of luscious fruit clinging to the trees, fairly asking to be picked, why shouldn't he go to Denver and live with the druggist's widow who kept writing him

pash letters and sending him checks made out to "Cash" and easy to convert into same?

The nose-dive Anita took after the departure of Gus scared the pants off her. She teamed up with a truck horse called Louella de Long and did a sister act that couldn't ever be mentioned in the same breath with the Cherry Sisters. When Rogers and De Long could get no more bookings, Anita got plastered. When a theatre manager she knew told her the office had black-listed her because of her alcoholic habits, smacko, she sobered up.

Happily her father had died and she could collect enough insurance money to keep her. Happily she was sensible enough to realize that her only chance lay in convincing booking agents not only that she was off the embalming fluid but that she could dance when she was cold sober. Moreover she decided to give Hollywood a trial. The cost of living in movie town was cheap, she had heard, and the best dancing schools on the Coast were to be found not far from Hollywood Boulevard.

When she started to practise in Buddy Nolan's school, she was on the down-beat all right. Gone was the false pep she'd had in the old days. No more parties, no drinks. She was so good she couldn't believe it herself.

When she met Ken, she recalled, she went for him because he was so all-fired clean looking. As always, she hit the bull's-eye, asking him certain personal questions. When he confessed he didn't know the right answers, she decided to mother him. The trouble was, she didn't know her own self well enough. She never dreamed she would fall for him. She hoped, of course, that he would be sensible. His break with Mr. Lowell, his boyish enthusiasm, his fanatical devotion to work, lifted her to new heights. He, the boy,

was so "decent," so "swell," so "grand," that, when he was around, she wouldn't have dared dissipate even to the extent of drinking two cups of coffee for breakfast.

All the time, she realized, in the back of that dumb head of hers, a dizzy idea had been buzzing. She was in love with him. She was crazy about him. She wanted to marry him, to settle down, after they had made a great success; to have some kids, a home and a fire-place in front of which she could place his slippers every night.

She never admitted this idea even to herself. Nevertheless she had it all figured out. He was just a kid, nothing wrong with him at all. She would watch over him like a mother, share his joys and his disappointments like a true sister and slowly, ever so slowly, develop into a priceless friend. Nature would provide that they should become lovers. Inevitably he would lose his shyness; probably just as soon as they got away from screwy Hollywood. When the time came, she would cry: "I love you, Ken. I'll always love you." They would rush off to the license bureau, get married and live forever after in a mad delirium of happiness.

When Ken hinted that he must soon go to work or be forced to return to Texas, she was panic-stricken. For the first time she recalled the blackness of her reputation. She accused herself of having betrayed him, of having saddled herself—an old broken down tenth-rater—upon a handsome, gifted youth.

She hated Ed Feinberg, the sleazy, lying, blood-sucking small-timer. Still he was a man; if he had called her up in the old days, in Seattle, she'd have entertained him. She'd trade a break-in date for a half hour's diversion—it

wouldn't mean anything and she was confident that a break-in date would start Ken off on the road to fame.

Again she failed to take into consideration the flaws in her own armor. Feinberg promised her the date all right, but not until she was closeted with him in the shoddy old hotel on Fourth Street did she realize that she had made an awful mistake. For months her desires had slumbered, sublimated in the passion for Ken. As she waited in the hotel room for Feinberg to undress, she was as nervous as a young virgin who sits listening for the footfall of her bridegroom.

Feinberg brought gin with him. She drank, in order to keep herself from walking out. The gin liberated all the raging secret lust which she had so successfully stifled. In a few minutes' time she was transformed into a glittering she-devil, a ravaging Venus, a despoiler of men. Feinberg was amused. He rewarded her with the three days at San Bernardino.

As she sat beside Ken in the Los Angeles bound bus, she felt the core of her going rotten. She trembled. She knew she wanted him now, now. Because they were in the motor bus, she successfully resisted the impulse. But, she must not trust herself alone with him, never again, until she was sure of him. She craftily tried to gauge the safest method of procedure. She must wait. She must not lose him. She must learn how to seduce him, this time not with maternal care, sisterly devotion nor the faith of a friend; this time not with gin and those devices which, from time immemorial, have been used by harlots everywhere. This time she must seduce him with patience, with slow, fiendishly deliberate guile. She must prepare herself for the ordeal of

waiting. She must submerge her cloying desire for him in liquor, in other men. One day when he would be off guard, when he would have forgotten her naive attempt to make him love her, she'd overcome him so tempestuously that he would never know how she had won her dearly bought victory.

She would wait.

XIX

SLANTING spring rain fell upon San Francisco, flowing in nearly opaque streams against the windows of the hotel. Rain, Ken felt, was good after so many days of monotonous sunshine. The half light of late afternoon softened the skyline. The rain made buildings tremble and shiver, washed the streets with pools of silver and brown.

"I've kept away from you, Ken," she was saying. "Don't you really know why?"

He lay on the bed. She stood over him. "For three months I've kept away from you. I can't tell you how many times I wanted to chuck the whole thing. I stuck to it for your sake. I wanted to see you get a date like this."

"I know," he said.

"You know nothing," she shot the words at him viciously. "You'll be a big success some day. You can drop everything else in the world and dance. All you care about is that body of yours and what kind of knots you can twist it into."

He sat up. "But why bring that up now?" he asked. "We went over great this afternoon."

"Aw, for Christ's sake," she said, sitting down beside him, "you don't think the dough I'm getting this week means anything to me. I can get money without dancing—and I hate dancing."

"You scare me, Nita," he said and his voice quavered a little. "I was pretty happy to get this engagement. Coming

unexpected this way after the way we were kicked around in every bowling alley in the state, this is all the sweeter."

"Applesauce, dearie," she said. "You've got a partner. Don't you know it?"

"I know it. I'm up to here with thanks for what you've done for me."

"Do you know what you've done for me?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Look in my eyes," she begged.

He studied her eyes searchingly. They were clouded, brown with a faint fleck of hazel. Vainly she tried to pierce his mind, penetrate his thoughts.

"You didn't know it," she said, and her voice softened, "but I've been on a bat since we left San Bernardino in December and this is nearly March."

"You haven't been drinking?"

"No," she said bitterly. "I haven't been drinking."

She stood up, walked to the window. He followed.

"Let's not argue," he pleaded. "We got a night show to do."

"Oh, nuts!" she whirled about, caught him by the arm, clung to him and kissed him. Her voice melted away. "We've got to find some way to be happy."

Night had fallen. The little clock said ten after eight. He must rouse himself, he knew, and bathe and eat and be in the theatre at twenty after nine.

Suddenly he recalled what she had told him. How could she have submitted to those men, those horrible men, not one but many men in many places—Los Angeles, Santa Ana, Santa Barbara, even in Bakersfield the night Feinberg's wire came, informing them of their 'Frisco booking?

How could she have picked men up from the streets, from theatre audiences? And why?

The scene which had just ended had been so violent, so terrifying in its intensity, that he could not believe it had been. Yet as he sat up, the room told the tale: a chair overturned, the water carafe on the floor, the bed in wild dis-order.

Moving slowly, as if afraid to disturb the strange calmness which enveloped him, he entered the bathroom. In the mirror, he saw his slim body, the body he loved.

"We must find some way to be happy!" she had pleaded. Yet what she had done was unspeakable. Was that happiness? Was this dull nervelessness happiness?

Then he remembered his share in the awful scene. She had, he recalled, told him that he could not love her as a man. In bitter agony, she had told him.

"But I do love you," he had finally cried.

Then in a breathless moment, she had become a tigress, clawing at his body; afterwards a cool still statue, which he had enveloped in a robe of kisses.

He now switched on the shower and stepped into the bath.

Tony, the little Italian boy who acted as dresser for the Presidio Theatre, was the first to tell him.

"Miss Rogers isn't in yet."

Ken was ready to go on. Her dressing-room door, No. 7, facing the stage entrance, was locked. He hurried to the doorman. No, Miss Rogers wasn't in. He turned back to the theatre, the theatre where he was playing, the magnificent theatre, dressing rooms with shower baths, the cool, comfortable green room beneath the stage, the perfection

of the orchestra, the graciousness of the other players on the bill, the solicitous manager, the houseboards out front which bore his name. That afternoon, Ed Feinberg had come backstage after their act and had opened a bottle of Scotch, drinking a toast to their success. Anita had been rather moody. She had sipped her drink slowly. When the agent left her dressing-room, she had turned to Ken: "Let's go to the hotel. We've got lots to talk about," she'd said.

That was how it had begun.

Now as he anxiously searched for her, he thought of the months during which they had slaved to win this engagement in the big time. They had gone without food, they had worn their bodies thin; what had they not done so that they might quit the mean world of furnished rooms, cafeteria meals and petty debts?

Ken re-entered the theatre.

"Ready?" asked the dapper little stage manager.

"Miss Rogers isn't in yet."

Through the fire door leading to the auditorium came Ed Feinberg. He seized Ken's hand and shook it.

"I got Jerry Buckley, the big booker, outside tonight. Tell Nita to give her all."

"She isn't here," Ken said colorlessly.

The stage manager leaped up the stairs.

"I'll put the Flying Dooleys in this spot," he yelled to the head carpenter. "Lower the trapeze and rings after this act."

"Where is she?" cried the agent. "When did you see her last?"

"At eight o'clock. But wait—I'll go on alone."

"The good-for-nothing gutter tart," cried Feinberg, his face purple. "She's gone and done it again."

Ken found Anita sprawled in a chair in her bedroom. A gin bottle lay on the floor. It was empty.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

Her eyes were shinningly glazed. Back of her head, an electric sign blinked through the window pane. The rain had stopped.

"Why did you do it?" he begged.

"I hate myself," she muttered. "I'm no good. And I love you."

He kneeled and put his head in her lap. The tangy faded perfume of her rose into his nostrils. He kissed her hand.

"I know you do," he said. "I'm not angry because of this. It doesn't matter."

"We'll ruin each other." She shook her head. "I'm a slut. You're a—"

"I'm not—but I'm not—" he protested.

She wriggled to her feet. "Let's drink." A corner of her mouth rose in an ugly smile. "We might as well, after what we've done to each other."

"Don't drink. Tomorrow we must go on."

"Not me," she said as she reached for the telephone. "Bell captain, please . . ." To him: "I'm through here. I'm finished. Send up another bottle of High and Dry and some ginger ale."

She replaced the receiver on the hook. She tottered to the bed. "You'll see." She flung herself face forward, then rolled over. She caught his hand and held it for a long time.

"Buster," she said softly and at last, "you were a nice boy. A bad old man tried to get you but sly little Nita out-foxed him. I'm a hooker, kiddie boy, a born hustler. Don't you forget that—don't you forget it?"

"Don't say that," he pleaded.

"But I am. I fought it for months. I had it all figured out. You and I, we'd be real lovers. We're lovers all right now, but no one'll ever write a book about us. I'm too low, too rotten. You're . . . you."

"You mustn't talk that way."

A knock on the door. The bell boy brought a tray, bottles, glasses, ice and a letter addressed to Rogers and Gracey. Ken opened the letter.

"Don't read it," she said. "Wait! Remember that wrist-watch I bought for your birthday last week? You said I couldn't afford it. Well, I paid for that with some dough a funny-faced old guy who sat in the first row in Ventura gave me for—"

"We're cancelled," said Ken. "It's from Buckley."

"The old fluff," Anita jeered. "He's the bastard that cancelled me when I was the wrong end of Rogers and De Long year and a half ago."

The letter fell to the floor. Ken sat down.

"I'll go back home to Selma," said Ken. "I won't never be able to stay on here now."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," she cried, sitting up. "Sweet baby, I'm going to take you where you belong, honey lamb, where you'll meet everyone you want to meet and do what you want to do."

"Where's that?"

"Mexico, Tia Juana. Caliente, Mexicali, Juarez—"

"But how'll we get there?"

"We'll get there, if I have to go down and lay the railroad tracks myself."

"MEXICAN jumping beans, *Señor*, Mexican jumping beans," the ragged child cried.

"Buy da cigarettes. Four packs for da quartaire," whined another. On the curb stood a sallow, dark, half-breed. He held a tiny chihuahua in his hand and smiled. "Pancho Villa, he very bad dog. Bite ver' hard. Real chihuahua—twenty-five dollars."

In Frank and Jack's, upstairs, Anita Rogers pulled down the shades.

"You get yourself set over there, Poppa. What do you want?"

"What have you got?" said the man sheepishly.

"Five, ten or fifteen," she said curtly, "with or without trimmings."

The man was about forty. He was tall, thin and pale.

"How does a nice American girl like you get into a place like this?" he asked.

"None of your sweet god-damned business, Poppa," she said. "Thanks." She went to the dresser, took a notebook and a pencil-stub from the drawer and began to write.

"What're you doing?" asked the man anxiously.

"Keeping my accounts. You put what you got where it belongs and I'll be with you in a jiffy, honey."

"But you dance so swell. When I saw you and that kid do your stuff I said to Jim, I said, 'I'd like to meet her,' but he give me the ha-ha. Said it couldn't be done. When

I tell him, hot mama . . .!" His voice dropped to a low whine. "You're such a nice girl—why do you do it?"

"Sonny boy," she said as she stepped out of her evening gown, "let's talk about something else. Anything goes with me except asking me why I am what I am."

Frank and Jack's was gaudy, noisy and gay. Frank had built a substantial, square, brick building to house his many enterprises. The soiled appearance of the exterior attracted soiled people, quiet dinner parties, tourists, schoolteachers, maiden ladies and lovers. The dining-room was always crowded with these respectable, likeable, American gentry.

In the rear was the combined dance hall and gambling room, rendezvous of gamblers, petty and great; vicious women, jaded husbands, lecherous old men, boys with narrow mouths and vacant eyes. A long bar occupied the back wall. Slot-machines, arranged in a row, invited coins of every denomination.

At the opposite wall were the gaming tables, mechanically operated roulette, blackjack played according to house rules, craps, with house dice.

Midway between bar and games was the dance floor. Here, during most of the evening, couples moved languidly to the soft music of Mexican guitars. Quiet matrons dancing with their husbands rubbed shoulders with drunken prostitutes. For men, Frank and Jack's was the devil's paradise.

The room glittered. Many-colored streamers floated from the rafters. Behind the bar an artist had sketched a nude figure in crayon and soap. Women laughed shrilly; men roared with pleasure or cursed with hearty disgust.

The white-coated bartenders, the sleek croupiers who moved ever so slightly as they drew in the losers' money, the gay dresses of the house girls, the picturesque quality of many of the visitors, provided a constantly shifting picture of gayety, fragile gayety that does not last.

On a stool at the bar sat the tall, slim figure of a *vaquero*; broad hat, leather jacket, high boots. He had been talking to a little old man, whose dark sack suit and contrasting white hair framed a thin-lipped, ascetic face.

"I heard you were here, son," the old man said. "Johnny Butler came over to Selma from Sweetwater and told me he was sure you was you."

"I am me, dad," Kenneth said.

"But this place is a low dance hall, and in Mexico."

Ken finished his old-fashioned cocktail, chewed on the cherry and faced his father.

"I'm glad you came, dad. Must have cost you a lot of money. Here . . ." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of silver dollars. "This'll help pay your expenses."

"Thanks, son," said George Gracey. "You do look lots older—and different."

"I am lots older."

"What worries me is—these women. They must be diseased. You don't associate with them, do you?"

"Never."

"And you have no girl?"

"None."

"I'm glad. When you were a lad, I tried to teach you the right thing. I warned you about women because of your mother, God rest her soul."

"I know," said Ken.

"Well," the old man smiled, "if you say so, I'm satisfied. There is something in a Gracey."

"My name isn't Gracey, here, dad."

"What is it?"

"Buddy Renault."

"Nice name, but when you go back to the States, you'll be Gracey again, won't you?"

"Perhaps."

"I was worried about you. You should have written. I wrote to Mr. Lowell. He didn't reply. I—"

The black-moustached face of Frank appeared between father and son.

"She's on her way downstairs, Bud. You better get ready for your number."

The dance—sensuous, slow, replete with daring suggestions; a love dance, a dance of barren love. Sometimes Anita and Ken danced as frequently as twenty times a night, the number of their performances depending upon the size of their audiences and the corresponding possibilities of making more money.

Anita's eyes were forever feverishly bright. She drank constantly, never paying for her drinks, which were charged to the checks of her escorts. She seldom became intoxicated. The dance seemed to keep her sober. She usually wore a deep-cut scarlet gown. Her cheeks were nearly as scarlet as the gown. Her hair, dyed black, was dressed high on her head. Her feet were shod in red slippers. She spoke in a thin, nervous voice, frequently interrupting herself with an almost birdlike change of thought.

The other females in Frank and Jack's were loose-limbed, sagging-cheeked. Several were Mexican. One was Chinese.

Their gowns were cheap, their eyes lustreless. They regarded the customers contemptuously; their gayety was forced.

Anita was vivid compared to them. They usually ordered rye highballs which arrived in dark-colored glasses. She drank her whiskey straight, varying her draughts with brandy and *tequila*.

Kenneth was thinner. His skin stretched sharply over his cheek-bones. His legs seemed longer than ever, yet more graceful. The *vaquero* costume fitted him splendidly, the broad hat broadened his own fine features. The leather jacket clung to his form. His hair was tinged with auburn where Anita had touched it with henna. His eyes were clear.

Ken drank but little. Life itself was intoxicating. It swept him on, oblivious of time, unconscious of self, from late afternoon until dawn.

At first the house girls were attracted to him. They made simple, almost shy advances, revealing the hidden simplicity of their natures. They soon learned that he belonged to Anita. One of them, Lulu Renard, became deeply enamored of him. On a night when he drank more than usual, she managed to get him into her room. But Anita came after him. In fluent argot, Lulu accused Ken of being a *maquereau*. Anita laughed. Ken felt like crying. He went out, leaving the two women together. The next night Lulu came to him, took his hand and apologized.

Occasionally, business being dull, Anita would sit with Ken at a table. They would drink together. In some curious way a spark would fly from the woman to the man. Without a word being spoken, they would go upstairs together

and repeat the wild, unplotted madness of that evening in San Francisco.

On such occasions Anita would plead illness and dance no more that night. Ken, at first limply distraught, would sit at the bar, drink several straight whiskies and then go into the dimly lighted streets. The Mexicans of the town knew him. He dropped into little barrooms, stood shoulder to shoulder with them, learned their language. More than once, black-haired, olive-skinned youths followed him to Frank and Jack's.

"Frank wouldn't like it," he would say. "I meet you *mañana*." And *mañana* never dawned.

Thus like a rankly rich orchid, the perverse attachment between Anita and himself grew, reared its violently colored head, now drooped. The woman still craved the touch of his mouth. The man feared her scalding lips and drew back more and more from the chalice of her body. Yet he could not escape from her. He must obey her—although he hated her because she was a woman.

This hatred slumbered deep within him, fed by her insatiable desires. It was never expressed.

He still had the dance. The dance was still glorious. Even on Saturday nights when all California poured across the border to revel and to riot, the staggering drunks, the bleary eyed females, the jittering boys and hard-faced women stopped to watch him dance.

He was paid nothing for his dance. Each time that she went upstairs he sat at the bar waiting for her. When she returned, eyes bright, lips freshly rouged, she beckoned for him to come to her.

With a signal to the violinist she would slip into Ken's arms. They would begin to dance. They never spoke. From

a pocket concealed in the bosom of her dress, Anita would take a silver Mexican dollar. Her body would arch away from his, then toward him as, with the deftness of a prestidigitator, the silver dollar would find its way into Ken's boot.

More than once, during a single week, she gave him as much as a hundred dollars.

Frank and Jack's was shut tight on one night each year. On Good Friday the shutters were up; not even a meal was served. Frank drove North to Los Angeles on this holy day for his annual visit to his mother. Jack, his Mexican partner, went south to Mazatlan.

On Easter Saturday morning those who worked in Frank and Jack's, cooks and waiters, croupiers and shills, bartenders, house girls and negress maids, lay late in bed. When they rose, in mid-afternoon, they were still heavy with sleep. Some of them drank brandy straight as an eye-opener; others, emerging from the misty haze of their weariness, thought of other years, other Easter seasons, love and home.

Anita was sullen that Saturday night, torpid, dull. The long evening dragged slowly on. At two o'clock Pete D'Arresto, the manager, chased out the few stragglers. Ken thankfully hurried across the street to the sweet bed that was his in the Casa Verde, the little hotel in which he lived.

On Sunday he rose early. The moist April morning was heavy with tropic heat. A shimmering sun beat down on Tia Juana's unpaved streets. Frank and Jack's was closed tight. The Club was not yet open. The long barrooms and

cheap joints that lined the thoroughfares waited stolidly for night.

Ken ventured down a narrow native street. Mexican women, shawls over their heads, greasy men, squealing brats, were hurrying to church. The adobe building sat back from the street, half-concealed by a rambling frame hotel where women of all nations still were sleeping.

Candles which gleamed everywhere lighted the interior with a dull flickering glow. As Ken entered, the wooden floor creaked beneath his step. The wooden bench groaned as he sat down.

Before the altar, a dark-skinned youth in overalls ignited the candles of a flaming, bleeding Sacred Heart. A black-clad woman knelt. Six-shooter strapped to his belt, a lean rancher crossed himself before the figure of the Virgin, a plaster Virgin in a dusty wooden niche.

The door opened. Three of the house girls from Frank and Jack's—Maria D'Acosta, the pale little Mexican who always insisted that pure Castilian blood flowed in her veins; Jerry O'Donnell, the sprightly Irish lass from New York; the very American looking Eadie Sloan, ex-extra girl from Hollywood. In the pale candlelight, they were young and eager. Lines of fatigue vanished from their faces and their voices were hushed. Through half-averted eyes they saw Ken.

Because Ken was not a Catholic he felt ill at ease; ashamed because he could not understand the genuflections, could not touch the holy-water to his forehead, nor make obeisance, nor pray.

The priest, venerable, hair snowy white, ascended the altar, faced the Virgin, made the sign of the cross and began to speak very rapidly in Latin. Ken tried to under-

stand. The unexpected cadences of the ritual hummed in his ears. His discomfort vanished. He was no longer ashamed.

Old men, little children were kneeling. Ken wanted to kneel. He could not. He could not even pray.

In the simplicity of their hearts, those others were asking for a blessing. He too needed help. His lips moved imperceptibly. No sound came from them. His eyes closed.

Thin organ notes, thin reeds singing the mass; incense rising, soft footfalls, the voices of the boys as they sang a litany; and through it all, the liquid, droning monotony of the priest's voice. . . . Ken's senses were dulled, his body was in repose, his thoughts far away.

He saw himself again back home in Texas, the fresh rain upon the lawn, his friends hurrying to school. He saw himself in Star-ridge, feted by the diabolical Mr. Lowell. He recalled Hollywood, Anita a staff upon which he had leaned. How simple he had been! How naive! Lowell was a morbid monster, Anita sex-mad; himself a weak, drifting boy, contented only so long as someone else supported him, feeding his ego meantime with the cheap applause he received for his dance.

At first the vivid magic of these Mexican resorts had fascinated him, the lack of restraint, the unmorality of it all. Too, the races at Caliente on warm January afternoons or the feverish spell of whirling roulette wheels, the feel of flesh, the hot flavor of liquor on the palate, had enchainied him. And whenever he was stroked by a faint desire to quit Tia Juana, Anita was there, her hand stretched forth to offer him the sodden forgetfulness of her sordid love. And always he had the dance.

Eyes closed, Ken scornfully contemplated himself, as the pious Mexicans knelt before the altar. His room in the Casa Verde was really a filthy cell, Frank and Jack's a smelly, evil den; Tia Juana itself, a loathsome hell. To pleasure-seeking Americans who visited the Baja California town, Ken Gracey—Buddy Renault, as he was now known—was just another puppet with painted face and dancing legs.

She was still asleep in her *cabaña*. He pushed open the door and entered. She lay on the bed, clad in a lacy night-gown.

The scent of perfume saturated the little room. Cosmetics littered the dressing table. Shades were drawn tight, the door closed so that the air was heavy, pungent, almost acrid. On the night table was a half-empty bottle of Jamaica rum, beside it a glass and a tray piled high with cigarette stubs.

Ken seldom came to the *cabaña*, which stood at the end of a path curving downward toward the arroyo.

As he leaned over the bed peering down at her, she was soundly asleep, breathing deeply and regularly. Her head lay on her arm. Her mouth was open, her hair tumbling over the pillow. She looked old, unbelievably old. Her skin was hard, caked with old rouge, her lips purplish, her teeth gray.

Ken turned away from her. An alarm clock ticked noisily. On the floor lay an old magazine. Above the bed was a picture of Anita and himself, taken in Sacramento.

He remembered the day. An itinerant photographer had stopped them on the street in front of the theatre. Anita had not wanted to pose.

"I don't like to be photographed," she had said, "some day I'll look at the picture and be sorry I'm still alive."

She seemed very young in the photograph; and very old, lying there in bed.

Ken did not disturb her. He sat in the creaking rocker and listened to her breathing and the ticking of the clock. A dust-laden beam of sunshine shone through the transom above the door. He watched it move slowly, become elongated as it approached the bed.

His mind was clear. He was determined. As she stirred in her sleep, he called her name.

"Anita, wake up," he said. Her lips opened.

"Hm . . . lover," she whispered. "Oh." She recognized Ken. "What time is it?"

"One o'clock, I guess."

She drew the counterpane over her. "I'm chilly," she said. "What's the idea? Why did you come?"

He sat in the chair next to the bed.

"I hate to have anyone look at me before I put my face on—even you."

She was eternally the coquette. She smiled, then turned to the bottle of rum on the table, poured a half-glassful, drank it.

"Have some, Bud?"

"No."

"It's better than coffee, rum is. Wakes me up like a shot. Say, what's eating you? Broke again?"

"I've got money." He placed his hand, palm downward, on the cool sheet and moved it in a circle.

"I'm leaving," he said suddenly.

"Go ahead. I'll meet you later in the place."

"I mean, I'm leaving Tia Juana."

She was pouring a second shot of rum as he spoke. His tone was so devoid of feeling that she did not understand.

"You'd better be back by seven; Frank will be in to-night."

"I'm not worrying about Frank."

"What is it, Bud? Hangover?"

"I'm not 'Bud,'" he said, "and I'm walking out—on Frank, on Jack and on you."

"You—haw—" she swallowed the liquor, "where could you go?"

"It doesn't matter."

She sat up in bed. "What's got under your skin? Don't you get enough?"

He leaned toward her and took her hand.

"I've had it easy all my life. I've been soft. I want to go on my own."

She wrenched her hand from his grasp. "You'll stay where you are," she said firmly.

"I'm plenty strong," he said. "And awake. This morning is Easter—I went to a little Mexican church back of the town—"

"You listened to a lotta guff about Jesus and fell for it."

"I couldn't understand a word of it. But I did come to. For the first time in ages I'm conscious."

"I'll bet it hurts. Don't feel, boy. Don't think—or talk."

"I gotta. I've put some money away. Nita, I want to get away from here. I gotta."

"Not much—you can't take it on the lam."

"I'm not running away. I'm a free man."

"Free? Who told you so? You're a slave. I've paid plenty

for you. You're a jig to a dancing girl in a Tia Juana hot-spot."

He felt the sting of her lashing tongue and turned away. She pushed the counterpane back and scrambled to her feet. Her neck was scrawny, her hair snarled. She chuckled. "Come here, hon. Nita's the same as ever."

"Yes—but I'm different—today!" he cried. "I've got to go, Nita."

"No." Her voice rose. "I've listened to you all I want to. This is the middle of the night for me. Get the hell outa here!"

"If I do go," he said evenly, "you'll never see me again."

"You don't mean that."

He faced her. "I mean it aches inside me today. I've been low. I've got to restore my faith in myself."

"Ken, stay with me!" she pleaded. "Don't leave me alone!"

"I can't stand you any longer," he said bitterly. "Nita, I know you're regular. But I'm still young. I can quit all this tomorrow and never think about it again. And I mustn't wait. I gotta go now while I want to go."

She looked at him curiously. "Have you met someone?"

"No."

"What did you do last night after Pete closed up?"

"I tell you I haven't changed except . . . that I'm through."

"You're not," she said in a low vibrant voice. She caught his hand and wound herself about him. "Who will you dance with tonight, pretty boy?"

"I'll dance alone—or not at all."

She turned to kiss him. He avoided the contact of that

loose purplish mouth. She pressed against him. He pushed her away.

"I'd better go now," he said, and turned. With catlike steps she was at the dressing table, opening the drawer. She seized a small shining revolver.

He rose high into the air as if to leap upon her. He pinned her against the bed, pushed her back upon it, unwound her fingers from the weapon. With nails needle-sharp, she clawed at him. As they struggled, her lips touched his cheek. Her teeth sank into his flesh; then, as the pain ceased, she kissed him.

"Nita," he whispered, as the kiss ended, "I'd much rather be dead than . . ."

To Father Refugio Castillo, Ken came one noonday that spring. The old priest sat in his *biblioteca*, where his books were ranged in tiers on shelves.

"I am very proud of myself," Father Refugio said. "In all my years I have never been so proud. Fra Junipero Serra could not have made a greater conquest of the heathen than I have of you."

"It isn't a matter of the church," Ken said. "I'm afraid and I thought you'd reassure me."

"This shall be our confessional," replied the priest. The little room was in brown shadow. A narrow window high in the wall admitted an oblique light. "Our secular confessional, as it were," he continued.

Ken related how he had visited the church on Easter morning. He told how he had come to Tia Juana; he frankly admitted to the priest that Anita held him by chains he could not break.

"It isn't as if I could make money. I can't. Since the day I came to your church, she has given me no money."

The priest's eyebrows were lifted. "Do you not feel better that you are no longer her slave?" he asked.

"That afternoon," said Ken, "she tried to kill me. I gave in to her. She thought she had me. But I've stayed away since then. I'm broke now. I can't get away—yet I must."

Father Refugio pushed aside his wide chair. He removed his spectacles and placed them carefully on the *priedieu*.

"I was in San Francisco when I was a young man," he said, "and I was a young man not unlike you." He gazed keenly at Ken with his sharp black eyes.

"You," said the priest passionately, "are also a man removed from women."

Ken drew back.

"Unhappily for you, you cannot understand the mystery of the Church. When I walked through the Barbary Coast, when my feet strayed and my body grew weak, I didn't flee. I sought a philosophy that would save me.

"All this," he continued, "is incomprehensible to you, isn't it?"

"Yes. Like a lot of words. But I like to hear you talk, Father. It's quiet here. I'm tired of music and noise."

"My son," the old man said, "I know you as if you were I. You have not yet found yourself in life. You are essentially unworldly; you have fought yourself because you could not understand that you must conquer yourself spiritually or you will never rise."

"But how?"

"When the opportunity comes, leave Tia Juana, if you have to walk away. Better for you to suffer hunger and cold than to endure the pain of spiritual loneliness. Break

with this woman who has tried to destroy you. Since you cannot make a friend of God, make Man your friend. Seek and find happiness in yourself. Do as you choose to do—never again allow another person to guide you. In your own heart, you will hear a voice, listen to it—and obey."

The woman, Ken knew, was black as sin. She was unclean. She was conceived in slime. In slime she lived, into slime she would finally descend.

Underground she moves, her belly like the snake's, moving coldly on the fecund earth, giving birth to horrors unspeakable.

The woman, Ken believed, must be ignored. She must be regarded as a thing. A damned thing.

He could not speak to her. They danced and he held her away from him as if she were leprous. The maudlin crowds in Frank and Jack's no longer applauded. Anita, drinking more heavily than ever, did not notice the change.

Anita drank. Ken, icily sober, lived on sandwiches from the grill, and beer. He no longer danced his dance. His legs, like propellers, no longer flayed the smoke-laden air. With contempt he watched the passing show, the drinkers with their congested, bloated faces, the thrill-seekers with their shifting, blood-shot eyes.

He began not to see Anita. She did not live except as a sweating lump of dull flesh, a breath fetid with rank exhalations. If he could only flee. . . .

He did not visit Father Refugio again. Much that the priest had said he did not comprehend. The peace and calmness of the church remained like a placid pool in the

midst of a desert inferno, but he avoided gazing into the pool again for in it he had seen reflected his own face.

And yet, strangely enough, during this period Ken grew stronger. Because he no longer drank, because he ate sparingly, his eyes became bright, his skin clear, his will more forceful. He no longer was the submerged adolescent of Selma, the naive ephebian of Star-ridge, nor the morally emasculated *psuedo-vaquero* of Tia Juana, kept man of a prostitute.

Curiously enough, his experiences of the past two years seemed to have given him a quick understanding of many things, now that his body was freed of the woman's greedy attacks upon it. A new attitude—a cynical acceptance of reality—grew. He could be bitingly good-humored now. His tongue, tied for so long, was quick to answer, glib with sharp comment. He viewed the past and even the present with amused tolerance. Although he was no longer a parasite he was still one of a sordid company. In the near future, when he should quit Tia Juana and set forth for Utopia—then he would regain sincerity. Until then he would laugh thinly, acidly, at the world and at himself.

He permitted Anita to slip and fall that Saturday night. She was drunk. She missed a step. She sat down in the center of the floor and cursed him. Her words were not pretty to hear. He laughed mockingly and walked away. A waiter helped her to her feet.

Frank, eyes blazing, told her she could get another job. She wept. She begged him not to put her out. "They ain't no other place I can dance except here, and . . . and I'm afraid to go into a house," she whimpered.

"You can work the tables on a percentage," he finally said as he spat tobacco juice into a cuspidor. "Now get the

hell out and to bed. And you can move out of the *cabaña* tomorrow."

The next day was Sunday. Ken knew nothing about Anita's demotion. He dropped into the dance hall early in the afternoon. Pete D'Arresto told him Anita was through.

"And that means you," he added. Ken took it philosophically. "I've got dough in the bank," he said. "When I pay old Lopez over in the Casa, I'll be worth one magnum of sour champagne or eighty ham sandwiches. Do you want the costume?"

"Sure thing," said Pete.

"My own suit is sorta out of style," Ken laughed, "but it'll do for a hitchhike home."

He bought a beer and laughed into it. Life had a habit of being anticlimactic. He could have walked across the border and started North or East with plenty of money any time during the past two years. He hadn't had the desire, nor the strength. Now that he was almost ready to escape, he was being kicked out.

What would he do? Return to Selma, plant himself behind a soda fountain or get a job on county construction work, one-sixty a day and callouses on the mitts? No chance of another Mr. Lowell coming along now that he was over twenty and the first blush of youth gone.

Mr. Lowell . . . what a fool he had been! Better to have sinned in luxury than in squalor. He might have developed into a real dancer, a dressmaker, even a business associate of the old dog.

He felt gay; he felt like dancing. He paid for his beer and walked across the room to the orchestra platform. Because it was Sunday, the doors were open; few visitors rose that early in Tia Juana. The sun drifted lazily across the

tops of the swinging doors. The quarter roulette table was busy, the other tables deserted.

"Pete," Ken called, "can I do my old dance once? Maybe someone will throw pennies at me and I'm gonna need them."

"Sure thing," said Pete.

He danced badly. The old swing was gone. He missed an entire series of high kicks because a waiter walked across the floor. The croupier in charge of the quarter roulette wheel scowled at him because several players quit to watch the dance.

The exercise did him good. Especially the feeling of fresh air—sweet pure oxygen pouring in through the open doors, uncontaminated by tobacco smoke.

He started toward the door. "Well," said Pete, "good-bye, you sonovabitch, you come to visit us maybe sometime?"

"I'm hitting for home," said Ken. "Give my girl friend a kick in the pants for old time's sake, Pete, will you?"

A stout young man, sandy haired, his face dominated by a grotesquely large hooknose, back of which were set two button-like blue eyes, approached. The stranger squinted with obvious difficulty down the vast slope of his nose. He was well dressed and spoke with a polite Eastern intonation, flavored with a decided nasal note.

"I don't mean to intrude, but do you work here?" he asked Ken.

"Not any longer. I was fired just now."

"That's a pity. My name is Shaw, Leon Shaw. I confess I'm rather annoyed to find anyone who can dance as well as you in a place of this sort."

"You're likely to find anything from a worm to a mammoth below the border," Ken said.

"I happen to be an agent."

"Vaudeville?" asked Ken.

"Oh, no. No," he laughed. "I'm just curious, that's all. I like your style of dancing. Have you ever been East?"

"Texas."

Shaw laughed again, a short brittle laugh. "Will you meet my party? I'm with a young lady and her mother. She's a dancer—the young lady, I mean."

Ken shook his head. "I'm not in the mood, Mr. Shaw."

"You'll forgive me for—"

Ken interrupted: "That was my farewell dance. I'm on my way out."

"Perhaps we could meet in the Club or in Caliente. Understand, this is purely curiosity on my part—finding a natural dancer this way."

"And I suppose you want to put me in vaudeville with your young lady friend as a partner? I went for that sort of thing nearly three years ago. I'm through with vaudeville, dance halls or anything connected with dancing."

"I'm sorry," said the agent. He proffered a hand.

Ken left Frank and Jack's. As he crossed the street to the Casa Verde, a growing fear assailed him. He had ignored the hand of a friend. He shrugged his shoulders as he entered the hotel.

Lopez stood at the door, his face beaming. "Sorry to lose you," he said. "*Adios*—my friend."

Ken's belongings were few. The bag he carried was old, the lock frail. He faced north and started toward the border.

Dusk was gathering. In the doorway of Frank and Jack's

he thought he saw the figure of a woman. He thought she wore a scarlet dress and that she was waving a white handkerchief to him. He was not sure. He went on, past the barrooms, the tawdry hotels, the liquor stores, the wooden causeway leading to the Customs House.

An inspector opened his bag.

"Five dollars fine for the pint of rye," he said curtly.

Ken smashed the bottle on the pavement.

"I'll take five days in jail," he said.

"Get the hell outa Mexico and stay out," said the inspector.

"*Pronto*—and *muchas gracias*," Ken grinned.

In National City, he stopped for a cup of coffee. His feet ached. He decided to hail an automobile. Limousines swept by on well oiled springs. A battered Ford, driven by a sailor, halted.

The sailor was a little tight. He sang a song of Singapore—"Learned it in a crib over there from a limey jane."

"Lord knows what a woman is for,
You can't find out in Singapore.
A tiger makes a rug so nice,
A she-cat catches all the mice,
An elephant's ivory is white as snow,
But what is a woman? You'll never know.
Her claws are sharp, her teeth are white;
She lies in wait for you through the night.
The trap she lays is dark and deep,
Its mouth is wide, its sides are steep.
She's the huntress—you're her prey—"

"I never knew what the word 'prey' meant," said the sailor.

"It means a man, I guess," said Ken.

"She's the huntress—you're her prey," repeated the sailor.

"She'll tame you till you'll dance all day.

She'll take your youth and money away.

Saint and devil, sinner and saint

She's never what she is and she is what
she ain't.

And so I asks—

What is a woman—angel or whore?

You'll never find out in Singapore."

"Or any place else," said Ken.

"And so say I," chuckled the sailor. "Say, buddy, you ain't a fag by any chance, are you?"

"No," said Ken, and laughed.

The room cost one-buck-fifty. The bed was cool, the sheets smelled sweet. The morning shower was a luxury.

In the hotel restaurant, Ken ordered ham and eggs, rolls and coffee. He sat at the counter. Next to him sat a gray-haired woman—then a little brunette—then Mr. Shaw.

He called across the counter: "Mr. Shaw."

The little man with the big nose squinted. The middle-aged woman smiled and said: "Leon is so near-sighted that he can only see his own nose!" She turned to Leon. "It's the boy who danced at Tia Juana yesterday."

"Oh, hello there," said Shaw. "Meet Norah Nasmuth and her mother—who I hope is still Mrs. Nasmuth."

"We had such a hot time last night that we still talk a

little woozily," said Mrs. Nasmuth. "Incidentally, what is your name?"

"Kenneth Gracey," said Ken. "I was billed as 'Buddy Renault' down there."

Norah Nasmuth had friendly brown eyes. She was chubby, very young, all curves. Her hair was set in loose waves; she wore a linen suit.

Leon Shaw left his own seat to sit next to Ken. "We inquired about you after you left. Frank Brocco told me all about your misadventures with your partner. He thinks the world of you and was glad to kick you out."

"You sound as if you were in the know."

"I know everyone everywhere." He handed Ken a card. Ken read:

LEON SHAW
ARTISTS REPRESENTATIVES
1481 BROADWAY NEW YORK CITY

"Broadway," Ken remarked. "I'd love to see Broadway."

"You're made for Broadway, youngster," said Leon.

"Don't let Leon get his hooks into you," Mrs. Nasmuth said. "He'll sell you to Colman or the Touheys for a thousand a week."

"Am I that good?" Ken asked.

"You're not bad," said Norah Nasmuth.

Ken smiled. He saw his own smile in the wall mirror. It was an engaging smile at last, the smile of a free man.

"How about putting me on Broadway, Mr. Shaw?" Ken asked.

"It's O. K. with me," said Shaw. "That is, it would be, if we were now seated in my office."

"When are you going to be in your office?"

"Next Monday. We leave for the big town from Los Angeles on Thursday."

Ken shrugged his shoulders. "I can't make it," he said. "But how about a date four weeks from next Monday?"

"At eleven o'clock?" laughed Shaw.

"Make it ten-thirty. I'll be anxious," Ken laughed back.

"I like your nerve," Norah said. "Will you work out with me for half an hour this morning?"

"Where?" asked Ken.

"We'll use the hotel ballroom.

They were homey folks, the Nasmuths. They surrounded Ken with an atmosphere of wholesome sympathy.

"I'm surprised that you even talked to a dancer in a joint like Frank and Jack's," Ken remarked to Norah.

"You're not just a dancer, my dear. When Leon Shaw watched you dance he said: 'There's another Clifton Webb, if he only knew it.' "

"Who's Clifton Webb?"

"A Broadway star who studied in Europe and who is sophistication to the finger tips."

"I suppose I'm a little hickish to you New Yorkers."

"No. You're a natural dancer and a born gentleman."

The morning passed as they danced for each other in the ballroom. Mrs. Nasmuth played for them.

Afterwards, at lunch, she told Ken she hoped to meet him again in the East.

"We're just show people," she laughed. "My daughter is quite a star in New York. Norah has really been on the stage since she was a baby, you see. I was Laura Lorimer of the old Casino days."

"Norah was a child actress ten years ago. I've held her

back until I thought she was ready to return to the stage as a full-fledged topliner. I don't want her to go into vaudeville. I'd prefer her to team up with the right dancer for a season or two in musical comedy."

"Nellie wants to back a show in Chicago this summer," Norah said. "Not to star me but to give me a start."

"Nellie must be quite a girl," said Ken.

"She's my client and I only handle 'quite-a' girls and boys," chirped Leon.

They left San Diego after lunch.

"Nellie will be in Chicago in September," Mrs. Nasmuth said as Ken bade them good-bye. "'Rose Marie' is booked there then. Norah and I will be in town for the opening. If you want to break into real show business, Chicago is a good spot nowadays. They're not too exacting there. If you can't make it and if you ever hit Broadway, look up Leon. We'd like to meet you again."

And so they were gone, leaving with Ken their own fine confidence in him and the flavor of their professed friendship. He felt a lump rise in his throat as the sedan drove away.

"I'll be seeing you," he said.

A few minutes later he counted his wealth. He owned three dollars and seventy-five cents.

With his bag in his hand, he walked north toward the main road east. At a hilltop service station which faced San Diego Bay and the Pacific, Ken asked the attendant which road to take.

"Where you goin', Texan?" the man asked.

"New York."

"Got a car?"

"No. How'd you know I was a Texan?"

"Smelled it. But you can't walk, son. It's summer and there's a desert back of the mountains."

"I'll get there," Ken said.

"Take University Avenue," said the man. "Keep on it until you hit the Atlantic Ocean. And God bless you."

"Thanks, fellow," said Ken, and moved on.

XII

HENRY COLMAN was a theatrical producer of the old school. His theatre was his church and his club. He was devoted to it passionately. If he had been a sentimentalist, he would have loved every inch of it—but Henry was too dull for sentiment. At sixty he was, as always, a realist to the core.

Henry had been a poor boy. The man who now dressed so impeccably once had sold candy in the aisles of the old Union Square Theatre and tickets in the box office of Daly's. He had admired and willingly slaved for his own lordly producer bosses of that day, including the noted international operatic impresario, Fritz Ungeld.

Henry's pride, his Commodore Theatre, now worth three quarters of a million dollars, had been erected on the spot where, for sixty years, four brownstone houses stood. It had cost thirty thousand in cash. Henry had come into possession of his pot of gold in a curious way. Ike Forman, who had operated Mendelssohn Hall back in the nineties, had died, leaving a most unbeautiful widow. Mrs. Forman had inherited her defunct husband's moderately large fortune. Henry Colman wooed and won her and thus was able to erect a new temple to Thespis on a side street off Broadway.

A gem of a theatre, the Commodore, a hat box, a unique playhouse, an intimate showplace. In the beginning it was a financial failure. Henry could savor a woodcock or tripe

for breakfast. He could play a mean game of stud poker. But he knew nothing about plays or players.

Immediately after the war, Henry had permitted George Drury to produce a musical show for him. Not an elaborate musical show, just a sprightly, tuneful little entertainment, with twelve chorus girls, two full-stage sets and a cyclorama.

"*Yvonne*" had been a million and a half dollar success. For ninety-seven weeks "*Yvonne*" played on, establishing a record for musical shows. Its success had freed the Commodore from debt. Mortgages were lifted; Henry Colman was rich.

He urged Drury to repeat the success of "*Yvonne*." Year after year "*Lulus*," "*Fifis*" and "*Mimis*" came to Broadway and passed quietly away because they were too much like "*Yvonne*." Dollar by dollar the stock of dollars earned by "*Yvonne*" diminished.

Henry worried. Worry to Henry meant lengthy spells of drinking. He got and stayed drunk.

During one such spree, an old friend and creditor, Mike Vee, costumer extraordinary to Broadway, met Henry in the Lambs' Club. Mike took him home and sobered him up. During the process of restoring Henry to his senses, Howard Vee, Mike's son, came home from Europe.

As Henry regained consciousness he learned that he had leased the Commodore for one year to Howard Vee for fifty thousand dollars. To his rueful amazement, Henry discovered that all he retained in the theatre during the period of the lease was his private office, done elegantly in Victorian red plush and leather; his private bar; his dressing cabinet and the rear stairs.

"The show sounds impossible, Howard," Henry was saying. Two points of red showed darkly beside his cheek bones. Howard Vee was a college man. Therefore, Henry tried to broad-a him, mixing blends of Americanism and Oxford "o's" with careless grammar.

"I come from Philadelphia, Kansas," Henry tolerantly explained. "My taste is plain. I'm the average American theatre-goer. And what's more, I'm a member of the theatrical G.A.R. I don't like your libretto. I don't like your score. In my forty years on Broadway I've never liked a show I couldn't understand."

"Mind you," he continued, clipping the end of his cigar with his teeth and dropping it into his silver-plated spittoon—gift of the fourth road-show company of "Yvonne." "Mind you, I believe you are clever. But you are doing too much. No one man—except George M. Cohan—can write an entire musical show himself."

"Let me be a father to you."

"I don't need a father, Mr. Colman," said Howard. "I have one."

"Mike Vee knows costumes. He is the greatest costumer on Broadway. He adores you and I love him. But I'll be damned, pardon the language—if you are going to put a rank amateur show, a wild burlesquey entertainment, in the Commodore, because your father has bags full of mazuma."

Howard was very young. He seemed mild and inoffensive sitting there in the red plush settee. His dark eyes revealed his puzzled embarrassment, his finely drawn mouth trembled in an attempt to find words with which to reply to the older man.

"I respect your judgment, Mr. Colman," he said,

"but—" He smiled quizzically. "I have gone to Harvard and to Oxford. I have tried to surround myself with modern young men and women, and to think theatre in terms of modern theory. I am of the new school."

He rose. He was dressed in inconspicuous gray, yet well-dressed. His hair was shiningly black.

"I don't belong to your theatre, Mr. Colman," he said. "I want to originate, not copy. In London, Nigel Playfair has done exactly what I plan to do right here in your Commodore."

"It won't work on Broadway. Even Hammersmith is not the Strand," said Henry.

"We'll find out. I have leased your theatre. You have already received three thousand dollars in advance payment."

"I'll give you back your money if you'll get out."

"No," said Howard Vee.

The Commodore, Henry Colman would have told you, had no bad seats. Its stage was compact; its orchestra pit brought audiences within whispering distance of its actors. The home-like little offices, three in number, were on the balcony floor. Howard sat in one of them surrounded by mementoes of the Colman past. On the wall hung an old photograph of Fritz Ungeld, next to the first night program of "Yvonne." In the corner was the ancient upright piano on which Riley and Doty had composed a score for "Yvonne," aided somewhat by Franz Schubert, Tchaikowsky, and the immortal Chopin. George Drury, in summer flannels, smiled benignly from an enlarged snapshot above the piano, happy in the thought that he had borrowed the idea of "Yvonne" from a Budapest operetta

called "Maxine." Framed and hung in a row above the dormer windows, so near the ceiling that they could be seen with difficulty, were portraits of Evelyn (pronounced Eevelyn) Gray, Fawn Rochelle and Ann Nightingale, soubrettes of the 'oo's, lovely ladies of the London stage. Once they had been objects of Henry Colman's silent and devoted admiration. Later, grown mature, they had married Lords or Earls. Subsequently and discreetly all had been divorced therefrom.

In this office, Howard Vee was chatting with Leon Shaw. The agent peered across the veil of his myopia. He waved his plump, bediamonded finger in Howard's face. "I understand your ideas exactly," he said. "Wit, charm, good music and youth. You can't miss. Your cast is already notable. Rosemary Rose is perfect for the lead."

"Thanks for the bouquet," Howard replied. "Is your dance team here?"

"Due any minute. I'll wait downstairs for you."

The yellow taxicab stopped at the Commodore marquee. Ken paid the driver and hurried into the stage door alley where an aging, hollow-voiced doorman halted him.

"Audition?"

"Yes. Is Miss Nasmuth here?"

"I don't reckon I know the lady," the doorman said.

"How come, Colonel?" Ken walked toward the stage door.

"You're just another one of Howard Vee's fresh youngsters, aren't you?"

"I'm fresh and young but I'm not Howard Vee's, Colonel."

"Why do you call me, Colonel?"

"Intuition, Colonel. If you aren't a Kentucky Colonel by birth, you should have been."

"I am, suh. I was weaned on bourbon whiskey and asses' milk. Come on in."

The backstage throbbed with life. Eager, alert boys and girls crowded the corridors. A chorus call was taking place.

"I'll fix you up with a dressing-room. So you're a dancer."

"How'd you know?"

"I can tell by the shape of your nose—flat, acrobatic; long, soft shoe; narrow—like yours—a trick waltz team; light comedy with drawing room flavor?"

"Right you are, Colonel."

"You from Mr. Shaw?"

"I don't exactly issue from his . . . loins."

"Eh?"

"Yes."

"Go upstairs to dressing-room number four."

Ken bounded up the narrow stairs, as the doorman switched on the lights.

"Tiny house," Ken remarked as the Colonel wheezingly appeared.

"Intimate theatre, son," the old man corrected him. "We call this the home of intimate musical comedy. Mr. Colman built it. George Drury nearly ruined it. Now young Mr. Vee has it and if I remember my English accent, 'e looks to be a bit of all right."

Ken laughed. "Actor?"

The doorman winked. "Was." Then he asked. "Adagio team?"

Ken shook his head. "No muscles. Here's a quarter for you, Colonel."

The door closed upon the old man. Ken faced a worn mirror. He stared at himself, regarded his features carefully. He was heavier, older, with frank, clear eyes. He opened the window, breathed deeply, then began to undress.

"New York," Nellie Nasmuth had said, "is what you make of it—though I suppose you can say that of any crossroads jerkwater town. If you're hollow-chested and hungry, you'll either be inspired to aspire or you'll expire. If you're flabby and self-satisfied—beware."

"Look at me. I'm just another Irish brat. Look at the nose—it's got a knob on it; the eyes don't speak to each other and the mouth lies at the foot of a triangle that's Irisher than County Clare. I can't sing. I can't dance. I'm the world's worst actress. I make eight-fifty a week—eight hundred and fifty smackers—and I stay pure!"

What a girl this Nellie was! Cheerier than cheery. The old lady, too, was hot stuff; Norah nice, really an excellent dancer.

"You're the cleanest looking couple of hoofers I've seen in years," Leon Shaw had said. "No use putting you in a Follies or a Scandals. No pop vaudeville either. You go into a cute little musical like 'Chasing Rainbows!' That's where you belong."

A few weeks later Norah mentioned Howard Vee.

"Typical rich young man," Leon told her. "Though he's got a nice theatre. If he only wouldn't try to pull a Noel Coward. He wants to do everything himself—except act."

Personalities, Ken concluded as he slipped into dancing shorts, collide in New York. Out west you drift. Plenty of space. No one cares. Here, he was becoming sensitive to

new contacts. After all, life was really beginning. Wild oats sown—mysteries explored—calmness attained—fourteen months of unforgettable peace. He hung up his trousers, removing some money from the pockets. He counted three bills and some coins. He was worth three dollars and seventy-four cents. He laughed. He recalled San Diego, his march into the back country, hitch-hiking, laboring in the fields, earning meals by working as a bus boy in a Coffee Pot, hitch-hiking again, riding the rails, nights in flop joints, police stations and even a hobo colony near St. Louis.

Those were hard, gay times. No uncertainty—no hesitancy. Nothing to lose. He realized now that he had been fleeing from an old hateful weak self and therefore was not to be cheered as a courageous hero.

Happily, he believed this weakness was gone. His body once more was a temple unto himself. He belonged to himself. He was free.

Fate, he concluded, had had something to do with it. Fate had pre-arranged that Norah Nasmuth should come to Tia Juana as he was about to leave, that she should need a partner, that she should see him dance that parting gesture of contempt for all that Tia Juana symbolized. Fate had provided Norah with a sister whose simple word would open all theatrical doors.

He had visited Nellie Nasmuth in the Chicago playhouse where she was rehearsing. He had arrived late one autumn day. He had worn no overcoat. She had listened to his story. She had seemed to understand at once, for she had lent him money.

During those early days in Chicago, he knew at last how low Anita had carried him. He knew how close to eternal

degradation he had fallen. A flaw existed in his character, a dull complacency, a lack of moral strength.

What inner change had transformed him into a determined, ambitious young man, he did not know. Inexplicably the Nasmuths, three wise women, had lifted him to his feet. They had guided him through the nerve-wracking experience of a vaudeville break-in, then into his first musical show rôle in the "turkey," which Nellie Nasmuth had produced.

"Ready?" he now heard Norah call.

"Hi, Norrie—sure I'm ready. Didn't know you were here," he replied.

"Let's go, then," he heard her say.

"I detest these chorus calls." Ray Leech gazed at his features in a hand mirror. "I don't see why the Mother Superior does it. She knows us. She could pick us out in the dark."

Ray leaned against the back wall of the stage. "Frankie," he said, "do you really think Julie has a free hand?"

"Julie sometimes has a very free hand," Frankie smirked. "I'm for him though. I mean, he's really poison if you cross him. He never forgets. He's a snake, a veritable adder, the dear thing."

"I'm glad I'm not one of those trollops over there," another boy pointed to the girls in line downstage.

"You are not, you know you aren't," Frankie winked. "You just wish you could get along without bosom pads on Saturday nights."

Into the circle came Harry Waldron, dark haired, square jawed, his face blue with a heavy beard. He spoke with a pleasing, soft unmasculine voice.

"I hear you dug a wristwatch at Emerson's last month, Frankie," he said.

"Nothing doing." Frankie made a move, "Ernie gave me a slave bracelet. I turned it down. When I begin collecting trinkets, put me in the old ladies' home. Cash on delivery is my house rule."

"Boys up!" called the assistant stage manager. The group fell into line as the chorus girls filed off stage, where those chosen buzzed with excitement.

"Less noise!" someone shouted.

"Julie looks a little relieved," Frankie said. He was chubby, Irish, pink-cheeked, a typical Tenth Avenue lad.

"Where is he?" asked Ray. "I never could see over these foots. I feel perfectly awful. Julie knows who I am, what I am and what I can do!"

"What *can't* you do, dearie?" Harry whispered.

"Nice mans, go 'way and let babykins sleep," Frankie replied. He did a brisk tap break on the ground cloth.

"Quiet!" roared the assistant stage manager.

In the second row sat Jules Monroe, the dance director. He leaned forward on a long bamboo walking stick, his bald head shining in the reflection of the flood lights, his lean tense face and cold dark eyes conveying the impression of fire within a hard exterior. His lips lighted with a contemptuous smile as he recognized old-timers in the line of boys.

"Frankie Regan, is that the best suit of clothes you own?" he asked in a low pitched voice.

"Not at all, Mr. Monroe," said Frankie.

"Bags under your eyes and over your knees," Jules barked. The other boys giggled.

Without changing expression, Frankie replied: "Just an old bag to you."

Laughter spread. "Silence!" Jules snapped, as he banged his stick against the seat. "I and only I have the last word."

"You mean I have," he heard a voice at his elbow. Howard Vee slipped into the seat beside him. "How're they coming?" he asked.

"It'll be a typical Monroe chorus," Jules quickly replied.

On the stage, Frankie pursed his mouth so that he could whisper out of a corner. "That's the boss. Isn't he cute?"

"That?" asked Ray. "I don't care for him."

"I'm bringing in a dance team," Howard Vee was telling the director. "I want you to look them over. They might do for a couple of spots."

"Where are they?" Monroe asked.

"Waiting backstage."

"What's their names, Howard?"

"The girl's Nellie Nasmuth's sister. I don't know the boy."

XIII

KEN and Norah danced before Howard's staff. Henry Colman stood on the balcony steps. Jules Monroe followed their routine with keen attention. In the wings, chorus boys and girls stood rigidly watching.

Norah was never better. Ken did not think he was at his best. He detected flaws in his work. He felt himself over-eager.

"Do you read lines?" Howard Vee, with inscrutable face asked when the dance ended.

"I played the second juvenile in Chicago."

"Meet me upstairs," the producer ordered.

The conference was short and to the point. Vee offered five hundred dollars a week for the team.

"And you can sign for two years with me," Leon Shaw added. Then to Howard: "I'll have your contract with Mr. Gracey ready for you tomorrow."

Dusk was falling as they spoke. Howard switched on a dim lamp. Norah sat, hands folded in her lap, happiness shining through her warm brown eyes.

New York pounded and hammered outside the window. Two hundred and twenty-five dollars a week net—New York could be his—the street, strange arteries congested with strangers, would soon be friendly with familiar faces; he would live no more in a cheap Eighth Avenue hotel; he would buy clothes; he would become a famous dancer. He would—

"Miss Nasmuth's part," Howard Vee said, taking a sheaf of "sides" from his desk drawer.

"Thank you," Norah smiled.

"I can't dismiss your part so unimportantly," he told Ken. "Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Why not?" Ken smiled.

"I intend to build the rôle to suit you," Howard continued. "As written, you'd be a specialty dancer—nothing more. You'd stop the show, get a condescending notice in the *Times*. I want our audiences to get acquainted with you, not to think of you only as a dancer."

"Wisely spoken," commented Leon.

"We'll meet then—at my hotel at seven-thirty, shall we?" Howard smiled engagingly. Ken nodded. "The Barrington on Madison Avenue," the producer added.

"I'm only twenty-four," Howard Vee laughed. "You talk as if you were already an old man—or at least middle-aged."

"I've lived plenty," Ken said, lighting a cigarette. "Not your sort of living, but bucking hard stone walls, and riding rods and that sort of thing."

"You didn't learn that precise diction in a lumber camp, now did you?"

"No. I once spoke good Texas English. Norah tutored me in stage lingo. I must sound like a rancher born and brought up in dear old London, eh what?"

"And your—I can't find the word—" Howard moistened his lips, "your quality? Where did you get that?"

"That's me. Too much quality. A nasty old man tried to find out how much when I was seventeen, and at eighteen a wicked woman discovered the exact amount."

Howard's apartment reflected the man. It was in perfect taste; autographed letters from celebrities hung on the living room walls, beside several Daumiers, Zorns, a Whistler. A grand piano was shiningly black. A balcony stood high over the city.

"I'm finding myself now. I thought I was gone, two years ago down in Tia Juana."

"Oh, tell me," begged Howard.

"I'd rather forget it." Ken puffed on the cigarette. "Do you know, I never open up this way?"

"That's because you're lonely," Howard said. "Not a realist. You need Europe, a touch of true ripening—not forced. We Americans age our cheeses by a process; in Europe everything, including cheese, is permitted to get rotten as it pleases. Have you ever been to the opera?"

"No—never dreamed of going."

"Opera is a European scheme to dull the senses with musical opiates. We Americans drink raw gin or rape our sisters for the same reason—*Nepenthe*—sweet forgetfulness."

Ken laughed.

"I have too much money. I spend in order to have less. You have none. You struggle in order to have more. Both of our efforts are futile. We strive only so as not to think."

"I like you," Ken said. "We are sort of pals—I feel I've known you for a long time."

"You have. And will forever. We're brothers, really. I enjoy talking this way. No women. Don't need them. They are all Cheshire cats with a streak of sadism."

"Occasionally, as tonight, I meet a kindred soul. Then I'm happy. I can talk. Once my friend was a veteran of the Franco-Prussian war, an ancient concierge in Paris.

Again my father's Scotch groom at the Sands Point estate. Again a little chorus girl who told me that life consisted of putting square pegs into round holes. I loved her until we fornicated one evening. I never saw her again.

"I'll tell you about me: I love music, old paintings, the smell of verbena, salt sea air, a rare heavy gray sky and modern music. I envy Austin Dobson, W. S. Gilbert and Gelett Burgess. I envy Lee Shubert. Why, I do not know. And I envy you."

"Why?"

"When you are not much older, you will no longer notice the obvious. You will seek inner meanings. Poor me! I shall always be a surface swimmer—money—fame—fame and money.

"By the way, I had an old friend sample a case of *Hencken Troncken* off a German boat. If it hasn't turned sour, we'll drink a toast to 'Sweeter Than Sweet.' "

"What's that?"

"The name of my new show and what life ought to be but somehow never is."

The following Monday rehearsals began. To the assembled company the story of "Sweeter Than Sweet" was not new, yet they chuckled and roared as Howard Vee read it to them. A wise script, a musical show that mocked life, merry graceful tunes, enchanting lyrics. They were gay, these actors. They went to work with light hearts. The show, they were certain, would be a success.

Ken devoted himself unstintingly to his task. He memorized his lines quickly. He marvelled as scenes developed in the hurly-burly of rehearsal. He was mystified by the energy which radiated from Howard Vee. The young

author and director slaved from dawn to dawn at his job of creating a new entertainment for jaded Broadway.

Slowly Ken's fellow members of the troupe emerged, their faces friendly, greetings warm. Rosemary Rose, endearingly plump, tiny as a great doll, merry eyes, fascinatingly small feet, a sweet, high, well-trained voice, smiled eagerly to Ken. Old Annie Begley, the low comedienne, raucously hoarse, lisping across her false teeth and through her bubbling laugh, would defy her fifty-year-old body in a thunderous attempt to make her feet patter in a tap break. She kept champagne in her dressing-room and invited Ken to drink with her, comparing him the while to her dear son, now an insurance broker's assistant and, thank God, not an actor.

And little Polly Tucker, the fresh ingenue comedienne, angular, loud-mouthed, addicted to bromo-seltzers and black coffee, garrulous, obscene and witty, platonic sweetheart of a noted caricaturist; at eighteen, on her way, as she said, despite a desperately defended virginity, to drink, the devil and eternal damnation. She wanted Ken to take her to lunch but he became panic-stricken when she politely added that lunch at his expense would not mean that he could take immediate possession of her body. Ken might have agreed, using one of the twenty-five dollars the company manager had advanced to him, if Polly had not employed certain casual and colloquial phrases which failed to shock him but reminded him too painfully of Tia Juana and Anita's vocabulary whenever she lost her temper.

The chorus girls were young, beautiful and decidedly enthusiastic about the show. They greeted Ken with smiles. Because he was a principal, they did not encourage him to invite them to lunch or to dinner. Agnes O'Reilly, ex-

Ziegfeld girl, toe dancer and expert gold-digger, eyed him coldly. Round-cheeked, wide-eyed Myra "Ga-ga" Malloy, baby-stared at him, then puckered her lips wryly because he ignored her. Ex-school mistress Louise Hayden sighed and thought he was just too good-looking. Garna Kendrick, high-cheeked, athletic, remarked that he was not an obvious nance; he might do in a dark port on a stormy night. The jet-black eyes and ebony hair of Luisa Pagano glistened as she said she didn't care what he was—he was lovable and she wanted to be loved by him.

Late one afternoon, Ken enjoyed a refreshing swim at Howard Vee's expense. The young producer took him to the Apollo Athletic Club opposite the park. They swam naked, snorted like young porpoises, raced to the steam room, lounged in billowing clouds of moist heat, were briskly massaged, relaxed, slept for half an hour, ate dinner and then returned to the theatre.

"I've been watching you," Howard said, as they left the club. "You're to be my real sensation. I'm proud I discovered you."

"I blush," Ken laughed.

"Take a bow." Howard grasped Ken's arm as they strode down Seventh Avenue toward the theatre, lungs expanded with cold pure air. "This is only a beginning. You are electric. Audiences will love you. Just wait and see."

Indeed, Ken felt electric vitality within his finely drawn body. As in a lightning flash, he now stood revealed, a figure of youth racing down the avenue toward Broadway, toward the theatre. He laughed, half aloud. He was tumultuously alive.

"Feel good?" asked Howard.

"Great! I'm happy. I feel like going places, doing things."

Howard glanced at him, a sidewise glance, appraisingly. "There's always time for happiness," he said.

A taxi separated them at a crossing. Howard came to Ken's side. "I'm tired," he said. "You are charging me with your own energy."

It was nearly theatre time; traffic blocked the streets, crowds poured into the theatres.

"In four weeks, Ken," the producer spoke with confident warmth, "you will be the best known dancer on Broadway."

Awareness, Ken knew, was dangerous. He lay in bed, gazing up at the ceiling. A line, stained brown with rusted wetness, carried his eyes to the distant dark corner of the room.

For eighteen months he had been rocketed through life. No time to pause. No memories peeping up at him timidly, like naughty children who have been playing over-late behind the barn.

The show, of course, would be a success. Howard Vee was destined to become famous. His varied talents were surely those of genius. Ken was glad that success would come to Howard. He liked Howard.

As for the others, they were precious people. Don't come any finer. Clever too. Full of wisecracks, gags and practical jokes, forever doing something to keep the old pep up. Comfortable old Norah dancing her head off. Rosemary Rose with the "come into my parlor" look. Rumors were being circulated. Rosemary Rose, it was said, picked a chorus boy from each show, made him her chauffeur and

took nice long afternoon automobile rides with him. Who, Agnes O'Reilly had demanded, would she play offstage matinees with this season?

Ken was beginning to love these new friends of his. Frankie Regan was a card, peppier than seventeen wild cats. He'd be great in that specialty at the end of the time-step number. Harry Waldron was an interesting type. Old Henry Colman was lovable.

As for Jules Monroe—Ken reserved mental comment. He was clever, no doubt of that. Too clever. His eyes too hypnotic. Ken was pretty sure about Monroe. Unpleasant the thought. Well, he'd been young, then, too damned young. He'd keep away, though, from Monroe.

Of course, he mused, there could be fun in it. No use making a mess of life because an old man had liked you once. Some day he'd come around to a sane view of such things. He'd soon be able to think straight.

At present and possibly forever, he'd keep to the straight and narrow. He'd strayed long enough with that Tia Juana floosie. He was old enough now to understand. He understood he wanted to be a star. A star for Howard.

Henry Colman liked Ken. "You're too clean a looking lad to be in this game," he said when Ken dropped into the office looking for Howard. He offered Ken a cigar.

"What makes you think so, boss?" Ken asked.

The theatre owner was a gentle, fatherly figure, whose appeal was strong. "I like you," Henry Colman smiled. "If I had a son, you'd be him. What say to a cocktail, gin, *Noéillet Prat* and a dash of anisette?"

"Thanks, but no drinking until the show opens. Thanks."

"It's all right with me, son," the old man said. "I know you are a clean-living, clean-thinking lad. Keep away from show girls—and chorus boys." Colman winked. "Don't let musical comedy shennanigans get you, chappie. Marry someone outside the business and stay married." He bit off the end of his cigar and spat it into the spittoon.

Dick Carter was the juvenile. A handsome kid with curly red hair. Brusque Irish. No question about his good humor. Or heart.

Across the street from the theatre was a cafeteria. At the center of the rear wall was a telephone booth. If you knew how, you could walk right through the booth into an old-fashioned barroom.

Dick Carter took Ken to dinner one evening. Dick was full of advice. Ken drank a beer. Dick consumed half a dozen whiskies. "Show business," said Dick, "is a lotta hooey. Especially this end of the game. Musical comedy is a hookshop on parade. It's a cinch when you're good-looking. You look as though you could put it over. What's more, take it easy. Don't work too hard. Let's go out tonight. I'll get us a couple broads and we'll have a sandwich followed by a piece of young chicken. Get me?"

Because he was lonely, Ken accepted. "We'll meet at the stage door after rehearsals," Dick agreed.

At eleven o'clock that night Jules Monroe was reviewing Ken's waltz routine with Norah. He dismissed the girl and asked Ken to remain. He wanted to look over Ken's high-kick specialty, he said.

"Not tonight," Ken protested. "I'm tired. And I've done the same dance hundreds of times out west."

The director leaned on his stick as he clambered up the

steps and over the footlights. "I'm satisfied," he said. He approached Ken. "No reason why we can't look it over in the morning." He seemed fresh and energetic despite a day of hard work. "I'm giving the chorus an extra hour's sleep tomorrow. They're tired out."

"You do work them hard, don't you?" Ken commented.

"Think so?" Monroe smiled. "Never too hard. I've an idea. We'll go up to my place, have a bite, talk, and you can sleep in the spare room."

"Thanks," said Ken. "I'd love to. But I made a date with Carter."

"Carter?" Monroe looked surprised. "That lush?"

"Why, what's—"

"Keep away from Carter. He drinks his head off. A bad boy. No refinement. Treats his wife brutally. If you're to be someone on the Street, stick to your own kind." He emphasized the last phrase. Ken was startled. He looked squarely at Monroe, who smiled, tapped the bamboo cane against his trouser cuff. "Well?"

"I'm sorry," said Ken. "I promised him I'd go out with him."

"We're calling on Luisa Pagano. She lives with some dame nearby. We'll have a drink or two across the street to get in the right mood. Then we'll buy them some shoes with round heels and watch 'em fa' down."

"I don't drink," Ken said. "I told you that this afternoon."

He stood at the bar while Carter swallowed a whiskey. A few minutes later they hurried across Broadway, down a side street to an old red-brick apartment building, the interior of which was remarkable for a stair well which

rose to a roof skylight six floors up. The din of phonograph and radio jazz echoed against the roof and down to the street. As Ken climbed the stairs to the fifth floor, Carter trailed him. They passed open doors, girls in kimonos, a card game.

Luisa Pagano's door was ajar. Her room was dull with faded plush furniture. A dim, unshielded electric bulb shed a weak overhead glow. On an old green plush sofa was a tableau: a blonde, perched on the lap of a sailor, hair awry, skirts above her knees. They were kissing.

Luisa's eyes shone. "Hello, boys," she said. "We been on a toot since nine p.m. I've had a hooker or two or three or four. Can't remember which. Gee, Dick, I'm glad to see you mutts, hot pants and everything. Put 'er there!" She threw her arms around Ken's neck and kissed him with quivering wet lips.

"Here's a pint," Dick said. He handed a bottle to Luisa. The girl tore the metallic tab with her teeth. The bottle was open. "Drink, horse-face," said Dick.

She poured a tumbler half full and gulped the raw stuff down. "Whee-ee!" she cried shrilly.

"How about Emma?" said Dick.

"How about it, Emma?" Luisa said, pushing the sailor's face away from the blonde's neck.

"Emma's mine," said the sailor.

"I'm his'n," said Emma.

"I'll go home," said Ken.

"Like hell you will," Carter pulled him toward the door. "C'mon, Luisa. You can afford to be nice to the both of us, can't you?"

"I'm everybody's," said Luisa emphatically.

She yowled all the way up Broadway. At Fifty-eighth Street, the cab turned east. She stuck two silk-clad legs through the open window.

"Not bad, eh?" chortled Dick.

Ken led her to the apartment house entrance. Carter fumbled for his key. The hall boy opened the door. A party began. Dancing, drinking, coarse jokes. Luisa's slim legs, white flesh. They drank. Ken swallowed a mouthful of a bootleg concoction. He could taste no more. Luisa danced. She lay on her back and bicycled. She begged Ken to match high kicks with her. He refused. He was too tired, he said. She ordered Dick to get out of the room. "Now, sweet boy, we'll see," she said to Ken as Dick closed the door of his bedroom. She pulled her dress over her head. "Come on, we'll match kicks!"

He kicked high and true. Slim in her scanty underthings, she kicked unevenly, stumbled, fell. He thought of Anita that last night in Tia Juana. He let Luisa lie on the floor. She began to cry.

"I was so thrilled, when I heard you was coming," she sobbed. "Don't be mean to me. You're so sweet, so nice-looking. Take me home." He picked her up in his arms and placed her gently on a couch. Ken was affected by her tears. He held her chin in his hand. He covered her with his body. She continued to sob. His arm held her shoulder. He rose. He was lifting her from the couch, her head drooping limply, lashes moist, scarlet mouth. Her wide wet eyes closed against his cheek as Dick entered.

"Quick work, boy," Dick chirruped. "Put her in my room. I'll keep her here all night."

"But I didn't," Ken's voice broke. She was a child, Ken decided, a stubborn, bad child. He hated Dick for sup-

posing. He hated her because she was a weak child. He didn't want her. In the morning he would dance. The girl, drunk and hysterical, the cheap little actor—they were not for him, he decided. Better to go home alone and to bed.

"I'm going home," he said to Dick. He let the sobbing girl fall back upon the couch.

She lay there. Her brassiere had slipped down. Her hands covered her round, swollen breasts. "Oh," she sobbed. "I'm awful, so awful. I hate myself—oh, Kenneth!"

"Hot Emma!" Dick laughed. Ken shrugged his shoulders. Dick smirked. He sat beside the girl on the couch.

"Oh, Dick," she moaned. "I'm so unhappy. Love me. Make me forget."

Dick's eyes said, "Get out!" Ken quit the room and the apartment.

The following day, neither Dick Carter nor Luisa Pagano reported at rehearsal. An understudy read Dick's lines, an extra girl danced in the chorus. When they did not appear on a second morning, Howard Vee reported their absence to Actors' Equity. That afternoon they were dropped from the cast of "Sweeter Than Sweet."

Jules Monroe visited Ken's dressing-room. "You were lucky," he said. "How did you manage to stay on your feet yesterday morning?"

"I didn't drink," Ken said.

"I'm not a moralist," Monroe explained, "though I could preach a two-hour sermon at your head."

"Please don't."

"Kenneth!" Jules said with sudden passion. "I'm going

to London when I finish this show—that's where you belong. With me. You need me to help you. You're too—gullible—too unsophisticated."

Ken shook his head. "You've got me wrong. And I'm not for you, Jules," he added.

"Are you sure?"

"You don't have to be so obvious," Ken countered. "I'm not a schoolboy."

"You're a fool," Monroe snapped. Then he softened. As Ken sat at his dressing table, cleansing his face with cold cream, the bony hand of the director touched his cheek. "I can help you here too," Jules said. "I'm powerful."

"Thanks," Ken replied. "I don't need help just now."

XIII

THE curtain fell on the last act. The company laughed, cheered, embraced, kissed each other. Norah flung her arms about Ken's neck. The chorus girls danced with the boys. The show was a hit. Howard, in evening clothes, was dragged out of Rosemary Rose's dressing-room. He looked pale but was smiling broadly.

"Thank God it's over!" he said. "And thanks to all of you. The chorus can go home and get some sleep. I want to talk to the principals."

Girls and boys drifted away. "I wanted you to have a little champagne with me tonight," he told those who remained on stage. "You deserve it. You were wonderful. What say?"

They readily agreed. Visitors were arriving. The elegance of the first-nighters made the artificially ornate costumes of the players seem shabby. Henry Colman appeared. He put his arm around Howard's shoulders and called him a sly dog who had put something over on an old-timer. A hit—and the theatre would receive only a thousand dollars a week. Mike Vee proudly gazed at his son. He laughed at Colman's annoyance. "My boy," he said, "is a genius. The world is his."

At midnight, the party began. Mike Vee sat beside his son; at Howard's left was Ken. Then Rosemary Rose. The guests were in a semi-circle about a banquet table on the

second floor of what had once been the palatial town house of Rufus Gardner, one-time "tin king." Blonde Lorelei Swan, who had been a Ziegfeld show girl long ago, now reigned over the mansion. It was a speakeasy. A six piece orchestra energetically played the score of "Sweeter Than Sweet," repeating the tunes again and again. Ken drank champagne cocktails—many of them. Rosemary Rose confessed she liked his curling brown hair. She tried to hold his hand beneath the table. He was embarrassed and ignored her advances. Howard responded to a toast. He was more than a little tight. His tongue, usually held in leash, was free. He called Rosemary his sweet flower pot, his bouquet of womanhood. He pointed to Ken as his pride and his joy—his discovery. Norah sat next to Nellie. Ken kissed her. He kissed Nellie. He was deliriously, wildly happy. After the supper, champagne made feet tingle and bodies pulsate to the rhythm of the music. Ken danced until he was tired. He relaxed into a comfortable leather lounge in the bar. Jules Monroe, even more pallid than usual, sat beside him.

"Do you forgive me?" he asked Ken.

"Of course. Why, Jules, you are terrific. We're all terrific! The show's a success."

"When are you leaving?" whispered Jules. Without waiting for an answer, he continued: "Come with me. We'll have a quiet chat. It's so noisy here."

Ken rose, rocking on his heels. He uttered a low pitched, sharp laugh. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lowell," he said. He shook his head pityingly. Then to Monroe's astonishment, he delivered a noisy "bird" straight into the director's face.

Howard leaned against the bar. Ken crossed the room

and stood beside him. Jules Monroe followed, an odd smile on his thin lips.

"You'd better lay off the liquor, Gracey," he warned. "It'll make you do things you can't get away with on Broadway."

"What do you mean?" Howard asked. The dimly lighted barroom, walls lined with glossy black leather, was crowded.

"He got tight the night Dick Carter went on his bat."

"I did what?" Ken demanded in astonished anger.

"I can't say what you did, Kenneth," Monroe smiled. "Anyone who pimped in Tia Juana for two years is likely to—"

"You're wrong, Jules," Howard interrupted. "I know the truth about Ken—"

"He was a pimp. Leon Shaw says so."

In a swift complex of motion, bodies shifting, epithets spat from angry lips, Howard moved like a battering ram through the knot of men who surrounded Jules and Ken. He struck the director with bare knuckles. Jules flushed scarlet, then became livid. He stumbled. Some one held Howard's arm. Jules was helped into the men's room. His nose was bleeding.

"You shouldn't have bothered. I was the injured party," Ken said to Howard.

"What hurts you, hurts me." He was trembling from excitement. He turned to Frankie Regan. "Take Monroe home." He handed the chorus boy a twenty-dollar bill. "Come, Ken, with me."

"It's all so amusing," Ken said. "Your defense of me and my morals."

"You really need no defense," Howard replied. "The public likes you. And so do I."

They lay in twin beds. It was daylight but the stimulating excitement of the night had not worn off.

"I really lost my temper. I was drunk," Howard gloomily added. "I forget this isn't Paris. American drink is so powerful that almost any quiet affair is likely to end in a riot. Did you mind the row?"

"I enjoyed it. You were splendid." Ken raised himself on an elbow and faced Howard, who was sitting up in the other bed.

"Do you know, you could live here quite comfortably, and I'd like it? This apartment is really big enough for both of us."

"What would poor Jules say about me then?"

"That's all so childish," Howard replied. "Jules is a great baby . . . or rather, an adolescent. I suppose he was about to acquire you—add you to his collection. He's quite primitive, a cave man of peculiar habits. He could be charming. Except for his private life which is a trifle unspeakable. In London he could be perfectly happy, accepted in the highest society. In Paris he could marry a Bourbon noblewoman, queen of the dykes, and live forever after, a decadent in a decaying chateau. In New York he's tragic—forty-six and no place to go. As a result he is never happy unless he is pursuing febrile youth. Poor thing. He can never light anywhere."

"Let's not talk about him," Ken said.

"No . . . let's not. And let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we shall relax. Sleep until three, then a drive, and dinner at L'Aiglon. What do you say to that?"

They rose at four. The day, heavy with the foretaste of snow, brought excellent business to the box office, Howard learned. He drank a cocktail, ate a bowl of onion soup as he watched Ken devour a great plate of ham and eggs. "An ignoble breakfast," Howard commented. "Fit only for Americans. I never eat ham and eggs any more."

"Aren't you an American?"

"I'm a New Yorker," Howard replied. "And you're still a Texan. Still natural. You have taste in clothes and in ties. Some day when you learn how to do all the New York things to-do, you'll be perfect. Cocktails for tea. Riding in the park. Spats when it rains. And a New York accent. Not to mention more sophistication."

"You do know so much," Ken marvelled.

"Said prettily, my son," Howard smiled. "I pretend. I've been places. Done some things. But I'm essentially a fake. You can depend upon that."

"I like you. And you're not a fake," Ken said.

Howard grinned. "I've been in London quite a lot of late. I've learned the English trick of looking bloody honest. London society, you know, sent Oscar Wilde to jail."

"Why did they send him to jail?"

"It's an old, old story."

"I never heard it. What did he do?"

"He tried to be himself. He was, you see, a poet, a worldly-wise philosopher and next to Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci, the world's greatest paederast."

"What's that last?"

"He belonged to the third sex. He was born not to be a man . . . and was punished for it."

Into Ken's life, glamor, long absent, was returning. The bracing air of a New York winter stung him, quickened him as fresh snow flaked against his face. Doors and windows were hung with holiday holly, the theatre audiences gay, women clad in the pelts of a thousand little furry animals, men so polished in their blacks and whites that they seemed less men than cleverly fabricated animate laughing dolls.

In the theatre, life settled slowly. Rosemary Rose hired Vernon Gale, blond, Virginian and virginal, as her chauffeur. Polly Tucker flew into hysterics when Walter Winchell reported that her caricaturist sweetheart had been seen in the Frivolity Club with another woman. Annie Begley filled her offstage waits by playing practical jokes on unsuspecting chorus men and stage hands. To clamoring chorus girls she presented Willis P. Flint, playboy and spender, who lived up to his spendthrift reputation by throwing parties every night, entertaining half a dozen girls at a time, wining and dining them and sending them home happy, each ten dollars richer.

Ken slipped easily into a smooth groove. He decided to accept Howard's invitation to live at the Barrington, provided he was permitted to pay a share of the rent. He moved into a small comfortable bedroom on the first floor of the duplex apartment, a modernistic room with triangular chairs, a low dreamless bed covered with sky-blue satin, a highly polished chrome steel mirror; on the walls bewildering post-impressionist paintings by Picasso, Matisse and Benton. Ken stipulated that he was not to be considered a guest. But it was difficult not to be a guest of the ever-thoughtful Howard, who had always lived in a faultless world, a patient, silent servant at his elbow; a well

oiled, wealthy world where the coffee was always hot. Ken, who now recalled with disgust the ostentatious grandeur of Star-ridge, was unaware of Howard's instructions to Rutgers that he be served with all the deference due a guest. He no longer experienced the minor annoyance of shaving himself. He was shaved by Rutgers. His clothes were mysteriously and forever in press. He ate what he chose to eat, as he preferred to have it cooked. The Mercedes roadster was, Rutgers informed him, standing in the garage unused now that Mr. Vee had purchased a Duesenberg. Thus Ken drove to the Commodore in a striking red motor car, regaling himself with the admiring glances of passersby as he sped through the city.

Soon it seemed as if he had always lived at the Barrington. He penetrated deeply into Howard's private life. Howard was a devout music-worshipper. He invited Ken to accompany him to Sunday afternoon concerts of the Philharmonic orchestra, to opera performances which did not conflict with Ken's appearances in "Sweeter Than Sweet."

Frequently Howard's conversation was alive with references to books and authors. Ken listened, asked questions and learned. Books, interesting, well written books, lay on his night table. Ken began to read. Not infrequently Howard entertained after the show. Sometimes members of the company would drop in for a chat about the unfailingly interesting theatre. But Howard's acquaintances were not limited to show people. Popular composers called to pay their respects. The shy, handsome George Cashman executed the difficult passages of his new Concerto in F on Howard's piano. Val Yeager illustrated his new 5/4 Spanish theme with variations, which he planned to intro-

duce in a forthcoming operetta. Little Harry Hayes, the polysyllabic lyric writer, whose contagious and sometimes salacious verses were epidemic in the smarter salons of New York and London, bounced in to recite lines he had just written for a new edition of a Cochran revue.

The success of "Sweeter Than Sweet" caused enterprising press agents to invite the cast to after-theatre parties at resorts in Greenwich Village, on Broadway, and in Harlem. On such occasions, Howard would be the star guest, who, because of his fame was required to play tunes of his own composition.

On Broadway near Fifty-third Street, Derek Bland operated the Club Gayety. Derek was an Icelandic adventurer who had arrived on Broadway ten years before, after a youth spent in Labrador whalers, Brazilian coffee freighters, in American newspaper city rooms and in one or two unimportant jails. He loved women. After a few seasons as press agent for a circuit of vaudeville theatres, his passion for delicately fashioned, extremely young girls, landed him a job as *entrepreneur* of a Broadway night resort. He undressed his ingenues to the point where decency drifted into shadow and then paraded them before after-theatre amusement seekers.

One night he entertained the "Sweeter Than Sweet" company. Derek presented his non-paying guests of the company to his paying patrons with barbed wisecracks. He dubbed Ken the "sky-rocketing male Pavlowa" and Howard, who presided at the head of a long table, the "American Noel Coward."

Little "Ga-ga" Myra Malloy sat at Ken's elbow drinking gin and ginger ale, giggling with shimmering, ticklish in-

toxication. While Howard played his songs, she placed a hand in Ken's. She gazed into his eyes. Finally, she begged him to dance with her. More because of a sense of responsibility toward Howard than for any other reason, Ken refused. Myra, tiny, dark, with a narrow mouth, trim figure and apple breasts, turned away.

"I'd rather not," Ken whispered. "You're too tight to go stepping."

Suddenly she faced him and in a low voice said: "You'd rather dance with your sweetheart, wouldn't you?"

"If I had one—"

She giggled. "Too bad he's so busy at the piano."

At three o'clock the club closed. Ken was drunk. He had been drinking rye highballs. His head was swelled with alcoholic fantasies, his lips were dry. Derek Bland came to his table. "I'll send a cab for you," he suggested.

"Where's Howard?" Ken asked in a tired, distant voice.

"Playing roulette."

"I'll go home alone," Ken said.

The city, as a cab drove him cross-town, was a purplish blur. Street lamps, fading electric signs, the blaze of a neon light, then the hotel. He unlocked the door and saw the apartment through the mesh of his intoxication. He was very drunk. Sitting on the bed, he repeated: "Drunk—drunk—never was drunk before—now that I can drink again I'm gonna get drunk some more." Suddenly he rose from the bed. His head cleared. His eyes saw the sharp outlines of chairs, a dresser, doors, a bed. He had never realized that to the little people of the chorus the simple fact of his residence in Howard's apartment at the Barrington was reason enough for gossip. Never had he dreamed that

he was living not in rooms leased by Howard, but with Howard. Of course, the gossip was untrue. And yet—and yet. The innocent gibe of Ga-ga made him wonder. He wondered why he had changed color at the chorus girl's remark, why he had begun to drink, why he had gone home alone. He was afraid to face, not Howard, but a thought. It was a curious thought, deep, sly, a persistent thought, defying suppression. He tried to sublimate it, to forget it. He shook his head with genuine helplessness. Drunk as he was, he guessed the truth. He—he thought . . . that way. He did. No question about it. He—he preferred Howard to—to a silly girl like Ga-ga—perhaps to any girl. He shook his head. "I'm crazy," he told himself quietly. "I'm crazy."

XIV

LATE in the afternoon Ken rode in Central Park, Howard at his side. Their horses were eager, the early March day was sharp. Jogging thus through the dun bridle path, passing trimly tailored women seated astride their mounts, meeting a cavalcade of youths from the riding academy of a private school, gazing up at the newly rising towers of apartment buildings, Ken was roundly, solidly contented. This confidence he felt, this rock-firmness of his flesh, this sharpness of sight and keenness of hearing was youth. All of him was resurgently alive.

"Come on, Howard!" he cried. They began to race. The horses carried them easily, assimilating the good spirits of the young men who rode on their backs.

A new discovery, this strength of youth. A new discovery, this self-satisfaction. Its cause was so remote that no inkling of it lay on the surface of Ken's mind. He knew only that a world of edges and corners was past; a world of smooth curves, the luxury of not being hurt, was at hand.

Still later in the day, while Howard was working or when he was conferring with his business manager or talking on the telephone to Leon Shaw; or at home, ordering dinner, asking: "Ken, will you dine with me?"—when they sat opposite each other, tasting the turtle soup, recalling the brisk happy mood of the day, Ken felt the new happiness grow within him.

As he entered the theatre that night, Howard greeted him. Together they climbed the stairs to Ken's dressing-room. The make-believe world of the theatre surrounded them. Rosemary, white and tiny in her careless undress, the trim perfection of a chorus girl, leg bent high against the backstage wall, the rippling chatter of the chorus dressing-room.

It had been a full, happy day for Ken. He had been alive, young. Now, Howard at his side, the mood of the night was returning. Fresh air had blown it away like a smoke ring, whirled about and dissipated by a sudden gust of wind. Here, in the theatre the still air, the smell of flesh and young sex recalled a nearly forgotten emotion.

"Howard," Ken said, "let's go out after the theatre, shall we? Are you free?"

"Of course."

"I feel like talking, hearing some music—not on Broadway—some little out-of-the-way spot."

They visited Paul's, on a side street, climbing stairs to the place Frankie Regan had recommended to Ken. "It's in the Village," Frankie had told him. "You'll like it, I'm sure."

As they sat down, Howard said: "This place always reminds me of Paris. Where did you hear about it?"

"One of the boys . . ."

"Frankie Regan, I'll bet."

"He may be here later. Nice kid," Ken commented. Ken had planned a long, intimate chat with Howard. The room was shadowy, with dim corners, part of what had once been a second floor front tenement flat. Paul, a vast, shapeless and somewhat frowsy blonde woman, sang "blue"

songs replete with not entirely symbolic sex imagery. Ken ordered a highball. A slender blond boy with the manner of a shy school girl came to their table.

"This is Ken Gracey," Howard said. "Meet Jean Darling."

"I'm so glad to see you," Jean Darling said. "It's been a long time since you'd paid us the honor of a visit, Howard."

"I've been terribly busy," Howard replied.

"I didn't know you'd been here before," Ken remarked.

"He hasn't been here for nearly a year," said the entertainer. He was handsome, his hair platinum, his eyes the amused, contemptuous eyes of the world-weary youth. "For you, Howard," he said, "I'll do all your new songs. I've learned every one, every one. They're perfection. May I sing them?"

"Most certainly, Jean," Howard said.

Jean began to sing in a low, husky voice. He had visited "Sweeter Than Sweet." His imitation of Rosemary Rose was recognizably good.

"He's really a great mimic," Howard remarked. "He can do women better than most, although he's quite a man. Played football at Erasmus and won an amateur boxing tournament last year."

As Jean sang and Paul busied herself with her guests, Ken grew restless. He wanted to be alone with Howard, away from this nondescript room, the weak-mouthed Jean Darling, the repulsively fat Paul. Ken's memory returned to Hollywood, the Rendezvous and his chat with Buddy Nolan. Little round tables, quiet groups, men with men, women with women.

"I thought this would be a quiet place. I wanted to talk to you; of course, that's impossible here. Shall we leave?"

Howard nodded. They rose. Jean fluttered toward them, asking anxiously if Howard was displeased with his singing. A ten dollar bill reassured him and he escorted them to the door.

As they drove uptown, Ken was apprehensive. "I'm moody tonight," he said. "I'm not my usual self. It's as if I had left myself at the theatre—the happy me—" He hesitated.

"I don't understand. You were so cheerful all day. What is it? Dyspepsia?"

"That business of getting drunk last night. I should not have done it."

"A spot of liquor is always good for you."

"I used to drink in Tia Juana because I was unhappy and wanted to forget."

"Forget what?"

"Some day I'll tell you, when . . . when I feel we understand each other completely." They were nearing Broadway. Ken was oblivious of the lights and the cacophony of noise. "If I'm vague, it's because I can't express exactly what is in my mind," he finally said.

"I think I understand," Howard told him. "You require fulfillment."

"Fulfillment? Perhaps. Perhaps something still more important. Comradeship, perhaps—perhaps calmness, peace. I thought all that was just around the corner. Last night—and I can't tell you why—I felt something go snap, something let go. I was painfully aware of the need for more than I could ever hope to have—if you get what I mean."

"I do."

"It wouldn't be so bad if I knew what I wanted. Perhaps you can tell me."

"I've felt that way too," Howard said. "My work, I think, saves me. Makes me typically an extrovert. I submerge self in a sort of bogus self-expression. Logically your dancing should do the same for you."

"It did—until I knew that I was making good. The struggle is over. The fun's gone."

"I see—you have passed the incubator stage—you are sprouting wings—"

"Horns, rather—" Ken smiled. "It's a relief to get close to myself—to see what I am becoming—that's why I wanted to talk. But I'm through spoiling your evening. What shall we do?"

They were nearing Fiftieth Street. "Let's drop in at Lido," Howard suggested.

The Lido was discreetly sophisticated, its music gently soothing, its service perfection. They sat in a corner and watched the dancers.

"This is better," Howard said. "This is a little of the old world, London, Paris, New York, everywhere where men and women are free. No ostentation. No curiosity. The mob does not come here. Hoboes are not admitted. Part of what we are is here. Artificiality. Veneer. You're gay at Lido, carefree. At Lido or any place like Lido, I'm me. Ken, I'm no longer a solid rock. No longer selfish about fame or success, or money. Here no one asks me for anything. Here I'm—me."

Ken was annoyed. "You're never solid rock. You are

always considerate—and kind—and sweet. You are thoughtful in the real sense."

"To you perhaps, but to others, I'm hard," Howard replied. He looked at Ken, at his puzzled eyes and the lips which quivered in a half-framed question. "Let's drop this self-analysis. Let's drink some champagne."

Nothing in the champagne to upset a baby. No bitter taste, as of *tequila* or old-fashions, concocted at Frank and Jack's bar. It was silly to be bound up like a mummy in the past. Why not drink? Why exert self-control? The blinding sweep of strings in a tango vibrated through the room. The wine jiggled in his eyes. He watched Howard cross to a distant table.

"Day dreaming?" he heard a voice ask. "Or should I have said mooning?"

He looked up.

"Where's your belle?"

The round pink cheeks of Frankie.

Ken blinked. "Where's Howard?" Frankie asked.

"Over there . . . talking to Louis Sobol. How did you find us?"

"I followed you up here."

"How did you know we were here?"

"Jean Darling recalled that Howard likes Lido. He said to try it first. I did. Aren't you glad?"

Ken looked at the boy. "I'm always glad to see you, Frankie."

"Be careful, Ken; or people will be hearing you and saying that—

"That all is vanity?"

"That we are—like this and that."

"We aren't, though."

"We should be, Kennie. Why not? I'm lush. I'm gay. I'm wicked. I'm everything that flames." He smiled that vapid, silly smile. Then, becoming serious: "Oh, tush, I'm a plain idiot, if I only knew it . . . but I don't. Though you could like me a little—"

Through the mulled over, warmed over embers of his consciousness, Ken spoke. "I can't, Frankie," he said.

"Him?"

Ken did not reply.

Frankie was gone. Howard's progress through the room was that of a triumphant monarch. Everyone knew him; everyone was eager to touch his hand, to ask for news of his plans, to discuss theatre.

Ken's glorious happiness of the afternoon fled. In its place came horrible fear.

He could not trust himself. His passion, slow to rise, now threatened to overpower him. The vague forebodings of the preceding night had given way to dead certainty. Frankie's easy acceptance of the idea that Howard was Ken's all-important *alter ego*, proved that all the world knew his secret thoughts. Why conceal the truth? To find happiness again must he not proclaim the truth?

And yet . . .

Rather than face truth, Ken chose to flee from it. He went downstairs to the men's room.

He whispered something to the black boy, who disappeared for a moment and then returned with a pint of bootleg rye. Ken opened the bottle and drank. As he re-entered the room of shifting gold and black, he became dizzy. Painted faces whirled. Women in evening dress clung tightly to their men. The orchestra sobbed an

African dirge. He found a path to a table where Howard sat. "C'me'ere," he said.

A moment later he was holding Howard's arm. "Get me out of here, Howie," he was saying. "Get me out of here before I make a fool of myself—quick."

Howard laughed. "You're drunk again. That's all. Where'd you get it?"

"For God's sake, Howard, I'm not—I'm not kidding. I know myself. I'm a fool, I tell you, a fool."

"Ssh . . ." Howard placed a hand on his mouth. The dance had ended. Sallow faces, sharp eyes watched them. Myles Hollinger, the columnist, tall, dark, good looking, was entering the room. Someone called "Psst!" Hollinger crossed the floor to the table where Howard had been sitting.

"I gotta go home, Howie," Ken pleaded. "Don't ask me why. If I don't get home, I'll do something I shouldn't. I must go."

Howard laughed. "I'll take you." He turned and caught Hollinger's eye. He rose, crossed to the table where Hollinger sat. "If you make a sob story out of this for your dirty column of imitation O. Henry, I'll black both your eyes and knock a few of your teeth out."

Hollinger said nothing. Howard suddenly realized he had made a grave mistake. The whole incident would be in the week-end newspaper. "I'm sorry," he said apologetically. "The boy is drunk."

Ken moved to the Algonquin the following afternoon. His belongings were relatively few and as Rutgers was enjoying a day off it was easy to escape.

He carefully phrased a note to Howard. "Forgive me

for the sudden run-out," he wrote. "I have been upset during the past few days. I would rather die than bother you. Until I get over this funny feeling, I would rather live alone. Thank you for everything. And forgive me for what may seem like a crazy idea—walking out without even saying anything to you. But it is all for the best. I'll be at the Algonquin. K."

A taxi driver bore his two trunks downstairs. The Barrington, the Mercedes, the perfect meals, the dreamless bed, all vanished into a past irrevocably gone.

Cool in a simple hotel room, Ken waited for Howard's call. At five o'clock it came.

"I just read your reasonless note. What does it mean? I don't care if you get drunk every night in the week."

"Old dear, you got me wrong," Ken protested with false nonchalance. "I'm a blubbering fool. Don't trust me."

Howard, at the end of a telephone circuit, laughed. "I don't. I love untrustable friends. Makes life varied."

"Then put it this way: I want to be no man's. I'm free."

"But let's talk about it. Have dinner with me . . . at . . . at L'Aiglon."

"Tomorrow night. Tonight, I'm vicious, hangoverish."

Howard regretfully said: "Then I'll see you at the theatre tonight?"

"Of course."

He disconnected. Ken faced the silent phone. He shrugged his shoulders. This was the easiest course out of difficult seas. He would slowly, gently guide Howard to an understanding of what an association with him might mean.

XV

KEN was very calm, very self-possessed that night. He wafted a carefree greeting to Rosemary, a light kiss for Norah's cheek, a flippant word to Frankie Regan. When Howard appeared on the backstage stairs, Ken was powdering his face, his make-up complete.

"I couldn't wait to see you," Howard said. "You've really made me feel very bad."

"I'm sorry you misunderstood." Ken was contrite.

"Why be temperamental? I mean by moving out. I don't care about the drinking. Nor what happened last night. We'll keep out of night clubs, if you please. We'll have our parties at home."

"Old mother Vee and her brood," Ken mocked. "No."

The stage manager called, "Curtain! Curtain!" "I've got to go," Ken said. "See you after the show."

As he danced in front of the chorus line, he heard Frankie Regan whisper: "Look at A one hundred and seven. Get it, Ken."

Ken flung legs high. He balanced himself deftly. In the first row center, directly back of the orchestra leader, he saw steel blue eyes watching him. Later, from the wings, he noticed a full-faced, light-haired, monocled man of about forty. "Ernie Emerson," Frankie whispered. Above the roar of applause, Ken asked: "Who's he?" "Boston jeweler," Ray Leech said.

At intermission, an usher came to Ken's dressing-room.

"A gentleman gave me this box for you, Mr. Gracey. A note's inside." He handed Ken an oblong package. Ken opened it. Within a purple velvet jewel box was a card, on the back of which was written in tiny script: "Thanks for a wonderful evening. Ernest Emerson." Ken opened the box. Beneath fine tissue paper lay a platinum wrist watch.

Ken called: "Frankie . . . come up!" The chubby-cheeked dancer, swathed in a heavy Turkish towel, appeared on the stair landing.

"Look what I got," Ken cried. He snapped the watch bracelet on his wrist.

"You are certainly luckier than I am," Frankie said.

"Do you know him?"

"We are the best of friends, almost sisters-in-sin, you might say."

Ken laughed.

While Ken dressed for the street, Howard appeared. "Let's go to Tony's for a Tom Collins," he suggested. "I want you to listen to a new lyric I wrote this afternoon."

"I'm tired," said Ken. "I'd rather go home."

"Stop acting like a baby. Check out of the Algonquin. Rutgers will call for your bags."

"We'll talk about that tomorrow," Ken replied.

Howard explained that he was planning a new show, an ultra-sophisticated European revue. He was writing a part in it for Ken, that of a debonair, worldly American who would possess a naive soul, "a timeless Casanova who can never grow up."

With breathless haste, Howard prattled on. He accompanied Ken downstairs where Ken saw Frankie waiting for

him at the stage door. Ernie Emerson was talking to the chorus boy. "I want you to meet Mr. Emerson, a friend of mine," Frankie said to Howard. Frankie was obviously impressed by the Bostonian. "This is Mr. Vee." He turned to Ken. "You know Ken Gracey."

Emerson spoke in a suave, cultured voice. He wore a monocle which fitted elegantly into his left eye socket. His hands were gloved. He carried an ivory-topped stick. The monocle dropped on a silk cord. Ken saw a glass eye.

"We meet at last," Emerson said to Ken. "And it's as if we were old friends."

The single good eye fixed Ken, who seemed to understand an unspoken command. He turned to Howard. "I had planned a chat with Mr. Emerson."

"That's too bad. And I planned to outline the show to you tonight," Howard spoke with sudden asperity. He faced Ken. "I need your advice . . . and help."

With firmness, Ken replied: "I'm sorry, Howard. Tomorrow must do."

"It's perfectly all right for you to join us, Mr. Vee, if you please to," Emerson said. "Although I am not an old friend of Mr. Gracey's, and I am in New York only for a few days, I have heard of you, of course. I should be honored to make you my guest." He removed a glove and Ken saw slender fingers, glittering with diamonds.

"I had arranged a small party," Emerson continued. "A charming party. Friends of mine. Dear friends." Then to Ken directly: "If you get what I mean. . . ."

"This is all unimportant," said Howard. Vexation was written in his eyes.

Ken read his mood. He was apologetic. "Originally, I had planned to go home," Ken explained. "But Mr. Emer-

son is here only for a few days." Then to Emerson: "I prefer to go home . . . really I do. Call me tomorrow at the Algonquin."

Howard's confusion grew. "I don't want to stand between you and Mr. Emerson." He stopped. Norah was closing her dressing-room door. She approached.

"Evening, Ken," she said. "Howdy, Howard."

Howard tipped his hat. "I apologize," he said. His voice, usually mild and persuasive, now was underscored with anger.

"I have waited for Mr. Gracey so long." Emerson's single eye twinkled. "Still, I prefer not to intrude. I leave you to him this evening. Tomorrow we meet at my apartment for dinner, my boy?"

"Yes," Ken said.

"At the Balfour on Washington Square, then, six o'clock . . . informal. I'll send my car."

The man with the glass eye replaced his monocle, bowed low and disappeared into the deep shadows of the stage door alley.

"Howard, forgive me," Ken said. "I am tired. Tomorrow night. Please."

Nellie Nasmuth visited Ken in his dressing-room, during the Thursday matinee.

"My spies have been sending me reports that you are going over to the enemy," she said. "What's up?"

Ken was unprepared for Nellie's remark. She sat on his wardrobe trunk, her feet dangling over the side.

"I don't get you," he parried.

"I'll be explicit, Kennie. I hear you have not only

walked out of Howard's apartment, but you aren't seen in public with him any more."

"That isn't true. Did Norah—"

"Yes, Norah told me. And she says you've been drinking fire water with your boiled eggs and toast for breakfast."

"So you've gone blue nose in your old age," he smiled.
"Don't you want your Auntie Kinetta to enjoy a nip or two?"

"One or two is all right. But why did you move out on Howard?"

"It's a long, long story, Nellie, my girl."

"Tell it. And be quick about it."

"I'd rather live alone. That's all."

"What other reasons have you thought up, small brain?"

"To be frank—and to be serious, Nellie, I don't want people to talk about us."

"You don't really truly believe what you are saying, do you?"

"I do."

She lighted a gold-tipped cigarette. "I feel like a mother to you, son; that's why I'm here. The grapevine has it you quarrelled with Howie at Derek Bland's, screamed at him publicly at Lido, walked out of the Barrington and last night turned him down for one Ernie Emerson, whom I've heard tell plenty about in my days on the road."

"Meaning what?"

"You know who Ernie Emerson is, don't you?"

"I met him for the first time last night."

"And I suppose you returned the platinum wrist watch he gave you?"

"I forgot to thank him for it. I'm having dinner with

him after the matinee. Nellie, dear, you are, you know, barking up the wrong tree."

A limousine was bearing him downtown to the apartment hotel in which Ernie Emerson was living.

"He's one of the best," Frankie Regan had said that afternoon. "Known all over the United States. Gives parties you can never forget. Be nice to him and he's your friend for life."

Ernie Emerson waited for Ken at the door of his penthouse apartment. He was dressed in evening clothes and Ken's first remark was one of excuse for the blue sack suit he was wearing. "You look splendid as you are," said Emerson. "Come in and let me show you my sky palace." Ken followed him through the entrance foyer to a door. They entered a balcony. The apartment was isolated—a complete dwelling, terraces facing the city on four sides, an island high above a sea of roofs. French door to the library, a stern room in 18th Century Spanish, curious setting for the Nordic Emerson, whose glass eye glittered in the light of its many candles. A deep red carpet warmed the library, where, in a corner, against a black velvet drape, hung an ivory crucifix; beneath it, many silver candelabra contained elegantly slim tapers.

"I am a mystic," Emerson said, as they stood before the bleeding Christ. "It pleases me to commune with my spiritual self when I am weary of my body. The crucifix is venerable—stolen, as they say, from the Cathedral of Valdepeñas in old Spain, by some blackamoor brigand. The candlesticks, of course, are genuinely by Cellini, the candles imported from the ancient stock of Pietro Quezon, near

the market place in Madrid. As for me, I suppose I am quaint, too.

"This apartment is my refuge when I am in New York. In Boston I am merely Emerson, the jeweler. At that I cannot tell you why I became a jeweler. God's gift, perhaps. My father was a Back Bay banker; my grandfather was a seafaring merchant, who traded in spices, silks and Chinese ladies. I have learned to love diamonds and rubies and pearls. My true passion, however, is silver. I collect antique pieces. When I die, I shall fill a museum, the Emerson Museum of Argentry. And now, young man, who are you?"

Dinner, dinner alone with Ernie Emerson ended at seven-fifteen. "We have half an hour left to us," Emerson said. "Then you shall be taken to the theatre. The warm southern wine we have drunk and the rich food we've eaten should make your dance beautiful tonight. I shan't come to see you again. When you visit Boston, you will hear from me. I shall make you happy to be my friend."

"Thank you, Mr. Emerson," Ken said.

"Young man—I am just forty. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"You are deeply attached to Howard Vee?"

"Not deeply."

"Say yes, Kenneth." The other spoke firmly. "I have been hearing about you for a long time. I know this Vee too. He has lived in Paris. He has spent several nights on the left bank with an Italian youth of my acquaintance. He was thick-skinned about it, considered himself above reproach, passed off our kind of association as an experi-

ence necessary to the complete sophisticate—then dropped us."

"You mean—?"

Emerson chuckled. "You see—I have trapped you neatly. I wanted to know if you have been more than his friend." The round, flushed face broadened in a grin. "I was afraid he held you. I witnessed the *contretemps* of last night with interest. You care a great deal for him, more than you dare believe. He is lucky! You are born to live gaily, you have all the potential graces—you could dress elegantly, if you knew how; I wish I could teach you. I know he worships you devotedly. I could see it in his eyes last night. Lucky, lucky man!"

"Howard and I have been good friends," Ken said. "I'm not so foolish as to believe in anything else—yet. I don't consider and reconsider everything I do or say. I like Howard. He likes me. But—"

"But what—?"

"I don't want him to know that I—"

"He knows. He knows now. Already he has become your slave. You and only you do not know it."

At the door, Ernie Emerson handed Ken a tiny jewel case.

"Really," Ken said. "I don't want to accept another gift. The watch is swell but—"

"You must," Emerson said earnestly. "I am very rich. Giving jewels away is one of my vices—not the most memorable vice, yet satisfying—just the same. When you visit Boston, you may, of course, reciprocate in your own fashion."

They shook hands. The limousine bore Ken to the Com-

modore Theatre. When he was in his dressing-room he opened the jewel case. It contained a sparkling blue white diamond. Beneath the gem was a card; in microscopic script were words Ken deciphered with difficulty. He read: "Wear if and when you come to me in Boston. E."

To Ken's surprise, Howard did not appear at the theatre that night. Not until the last scene of the second act was he aware that his friend was inexplicably absent. After the performance he dressed hurriedly. Howard's car was not in its usual place under the marquee. As Ken stood on the pavement, watching chorus girls meet their johns, he was seized with a vague apprehension. Norah suddenly stood at his side.

"Waiting for some one, Kennie?"

"No."

She slipped an arm into the crook of his elbow. In a low voice she said: "Howard, I hear, left for Montreal this morning."

"Montreal? Why? Who told you?"

"I heard it out front."

Ken hurried into the lobby. The box office light still glowed, but the shutter was closed. Ken banged on it with his fist. Harry Berg, the treasurer, grumbled, "Who's there?"

"It's Gracey," he replied. "Open up." The shutter rose slowly. "Did Mr. Gee go away?"

"He left on an afternoon train. Said it was too hot here. He couldn't sleep well last night."

"I see—" said Ken.

"Buy me cakes and coffee," Norah said. "There's a dear."

"It's funny he never told me he was going," Ken said, turning away. His heart contracted suddenly. The theatre became dead stone and mortar, the busy crosstown street a deserted cowpath, the girl at his side a lifeless doll.

"What could I have done?" he asked. "Oh, Norah, what could I have done?"

XVI

MOUNT ROYAL, high over the city. Sunday on St. Catherine street as a limousine whirled Ken from the flying field to the hotel. Women in summery dresses, men in shirt sleeves, the French signs over the shops.

The hotel stood, a massive square block of checkered windows. Ken entered cautiously, looking around as if to make sure that no one was watching his entrance. He went straight to the desk.

"I made a telegraphic reservation," he told the clerk. "Will you please find out if Howard Vee is in the hotel?" A pause. He signed the register, dispatched a bell-boy with his bag to his room.

"Mr. Vee has left orders not to be disturbed," the clerk informed him.

"I came here from New York specially to see him," Ken said. The clerk smiled and bowed.

"I cannot call him. His room is number six-hundred and four."

Ken hurried to the elevator. In a moment he was standing before the door of Howard's room. A smile broke upon his lips, which had hitherto been drawn in a tight line. He rapped.

"Who's there?" he heard Howard ask.

"Open, Howie," he cried. The door moved slowly open. He could read Howard's astonished pleasure in his gaping mouth and startled eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned," he heard Howard say. "How did you get here?"

"Flew. Harry Berg told me you were registered here."

"I might have gone on to Quebec. Why didn't you wire me?"

Ken felt the necessity of breaking the restraint which, as they spoke, dulled their voices as cotton deadens a footfall.

"I had to see you, Howard. I wanted you to know—"

"I'm here to compose songs for the new revue."

"Then I shan't disturb you. I'll go, if you prefer."

Howard's eyes darkened. A frown creased his forehead.
"I want you to stay, Ken."

Over a bottle of champagne, they talked. Distantly, tram cars climbed the mountain. The afternoon sun declined in the dull orange of northern summer skies.

"I'm celebrating the lyric quality of love," Howard was saying. "My new theme song will speak more eloquently than I ever hope to." He rose and went to the piano. "Listen, Ken," he said. "This is dedicated to you."

"Love is a pretense
Love is a mask
Worn at a Cinderella ball.
Love has no tomorrow
Why, love, do I ask
You to be
All to me
You to give me all?
Love is a pretense
Love is a clown
Torn by a mad desire to cry
Love has no future

Why, love, do I frown
When your 'no'
Tells me so—
That our love must die?"

"Here's the chorus," Howard said.

"I pretend
You and I share the days
So I can bear the days
When I'm alone.
I pretend
I will find new joys in you;
You'll let no other poison you,
Make you his own.
This bitterness I feel
Is better far than not to know
That love is real,
That's why today I've got to know
Just how you feel.
I can't pretend
You are no longer part of me
Here in the heart of me
The ache won't end—
So I pretend."

Ken applauded. He poured another glass of the bubbling wine. "You are frank," he remarked.

"Why not?" Howard said. He returned to his chair. "There is no barrier between us, Ken. You erected one. You were a coward."

"I was a coward, but I'm not one any longer," Ken insisted. "You know, I've always let you lead me. You were the worldly one. You've been to Paris and Oxford and what-not. I've just knocked around the States. I don't

know what is the cause of it—perhaps it's being here in Montreal, drinking real champagne—feeling as if I were crawling out of a hole into the daylight—but I'm going to talk at last. When we first met, Howard, you said we'd always be together. I doubted it. I couldn't figure out my problem. Now I've got to put out the flag. Stand up and cheer. You know what I mean?"

"I think I do."

"I came here to tell you that. I came, as your song says, to let you know just how I feel."

Howard was serious. "Is it because of me, then?"

"Yes. Howard, I'm as nearly sober as is necessary. Believe me, it's because I've got to tell you. I couldn't live without your knowing it! Keeping silent made me want to get drunk, to stay drunk and then to let go of everything. I suppose I'll do that anyway, some day—soon."

"No, you won't."

"I'll be yellow again. It's me—yellow."

"But Ken, this mood is not becoming to you. You should be gay, a dancing boy. You shouldn't think."

"That's just it. Until you came along, I didn't think. I couldn't have talked this way. I was a dumb fool who let others nearly ruin me. I woke up one day, not because I knew what I was doing, but because I needed money. I worked hard. That seemed to be enough. Then—a few days ago, I heard people talking about me. They were saying that you and I were—more than just friends.

"I didn't deny it. I just got drunk. I ran away from them and you. I was, as you said just now, a coward.

"But I know now, today, here, that the pretense is over. You, just by being you, prove that I'm rotten, Howard. Really rotten inside. I'm—"

Howard interrupted impatiently.

"Shall I tell you how I feel?" he asked.

"Please do."

"It's very simple, Kennie. You're what I need today, fulfillment—consummation—contentment. You're someone to think about, to guide. You are young, graceful, absorbingly interesting. You have humor, understanding, generosity."

"Oh, shut up."

"Very well then. I'll shut up."

The waiter brought a second bottle. He explained that the wine was chilled exactly to the proper temperature.

"Old wine from the comet year—look—1904."

"The year I was born," Ken said.

Dusk was drawing a curtain about the world.

"This wine," said Howard, "is light, carefree—what you must be when you, my dear, are with me."

He rose. "Ken," he said, abruptly, "I shall not go to Europe this year without you."

"But the show—I can't leave the show."

"You shall."

"No, I shan't."

"Dear boy," Howard said, "I shouldn't be able to write a word unless you were nearby to inspire me."

"I won't go with you. I must stay in the show."

"Nonsense—there won't be any show."

"Why not?"

"I've decided to close it up tight."

"Why?"

"To free you. So we could go to Europe, see Paris, London, shows, people. Sheer perversity of me to end the run. But then, what am I, if not perverse?"

"I don't know what you mean," Ken said, "and I don't care. But I don't want to be the cause of the show's closing."

"Then I'll send it on the road. The show will carry on without you."

"Howard!" Ken cried. "Let's not fool ourselves. Let's live for the present. I don't want to go to Europe. I want to stay in the show, to dance, to drop the mask I've been wearing, to be my own common, vulgar self."

"Go to Europe alone. Send the show on the road. If you can't wait, send for me. I'll come. Until then, let's have a few weeks together here."

"Perhaps you're right," Howard said.

They were silent. The room suddenly was dark.

"Ken," Howard spoke not at all in a voice of his own, "I won't think about the future. These weeks together are all I want. And yet—" Howard's voice died on the word. He caught Ken's hand and held it.

"If this could be just a period that would test us—tell us what we really mean to each other?"

Darkness. The hand drew Ken down to the arm of a chair.

"I'll go to Europe alone." Howard's acquiescence came in a low, almost colorless tone.

"Let's be happy, now. Really happy. Come—"

Ken slipped down into the deep chair.

"For the present," he said, "I'm satisfied. I can drop all the sham—you'll let me—let me be—myself—won't you?"

XVII

A TWO-WEEK notice terminating the Broadway engagement of "Sweeter Than Sweet" was posted on the backstage bulletin board. No reason was ascribed for the sudden closing which mystified both cast and public. Henry Colman, startled by the news, drank seven Martinis with a dash of absinthe one after the other. The chorus, in a panic because of the threatened departure from New York, went on a collective spree. All the boys, except Frankie Regan, decided not to go on the road. The spoiled darlings of Jules Monroe's chorus preferred Broadway to Main Street.

Howard Vee did not visit the Commodore Theatre during the balance of the run. Sidewalk gossip spread a story that he was seriously ill. A morning newspaper writer ventured to surmise that Henry Colman had taken advantage of some technicality in the lease-hold to dispossess the youthful producer. Because of the shockingly unexpected disruption of their personal plans, the company lost its carefree mood. On the closing night a farewell party was given by Willis P. Flint. It did not help to revive spirits. Several of the principals, including Ken, failed to appear at the party, at which the guest of honor was Myra Malloy. "Ga-ga" had succumbed to Flint's generosity, and had become his acknowledged "girl friend." At this party, which had been well advertised in the press, a telegram was received from Howard Vee. It read:

SWEETER THAN SWEET COMPANY

CLUB ELYSIA

NEW YORK CITY

MY DEAR FRIENDS CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH INCLUDE THE PREPARATION OF A SPLENDID NEW ENTERTAINMENT FOR NEXT SEASON MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO BE PRESENT AT ELYSIA TONIGHT STOP I HAVE ARRANGED A FULL SEASONS TOUR FOR SWEETER THAN SWEET STOP TO DO SO REQUIRED THAT THE SHOW CLOSE TONIGHT STOP I KNOW YOU WOULD RATHER WORK TOGETHER FOR ANOTHER HAPPY YEAR I AM SURE YOU APPRECIATE AND UNDERSTAND MY ACTION STOP MY THANKS TO ALL OF YOU FOR THE SUCCESS YOU HAVE GIVEN ME AND MY SALUTATIONS TO THE GREATEST TROUPE OF TROUPERS ON THE AMERICAN STAGE.

HOWARD VEE

Cheers greeted the reading of this wire by Harry Berg. Willis P. Flint proposed a toast to Howard. Myra Malloy drank to Howard in gin and ginger ale, which she preferred to sparkling Burgundy. "Who," she asked, rolling her blue eyes mischievously, "will now propose a toast to Ken Gracey?"

At midnight, the liner King George V sailed from New York. Howard's name was on the passenger list. Ken was, however, the only person who was at the dock to wish him God-speed.

After the gangplank had been raised, Ken returned to the Mercedes, now his own property. He drove swiftly up the west side of Manhattan, through Riverside Drive to the exclusive suburb of Riverdale, a quiet old neighborhood of residences lying within the city limits of New York.

A Filipino man-servant would close up the house in the morning. Meantime Ken would stop there for one more night—alone. He was nervous. The road was dark, the little white house lost in shadow.

Nothing, nothing could make him forget the perfection of the past weeks. He had been so calm, so thoroughly at peace.

No one knew he had nightly slipped away from the theatre alone. He did not even trust the taxicab drivers in the vicinity of the theatre. He had hired a cab and had transferred to another before proceeding uptown, so that no one might discover his destination. Howard had lived with him. Howard had worked, composing, writing. The house contained no telephone. Not even Rutgers knew where his master had gone. A few weeks of perfect happiness had been enough. Howard was satisfied. He had sailed for Europe serenely, with no regret.

Ken, entering the house, was lonely. He had kept his word. Inside, in the little homey rooms, common furniture, a piano, shadows, silence, far off a hum of the sleeping city. Ken was lonely. On the kitchen table stood a bottle of liquor, cognac belonging to Howard, a bottle of bootleg gin. To quiet his nerves, he drank brandy, then straight gin. He went to bed and slept soundly. It was easy to forget—easy when liquor was near at hand. In comforting sleep, time fled toward a tomorrow.

The company quit New York with splitting headaches and spoiled stomachs. When, at five o'clock Sunday afternoon, the New England Limited left Grand Central Station, one principal and one chorus boy were missing. Ken Gracey, however, accounted for, was reported to be

speeding to Springfield in a Mercedes which, some said, he had purchased second-hand from Howard Vee.

The new stage manager, Willie Warrener, an old-time road man, was scandalized by the actions of the company and threatened to plaster fines on each and every one of them if they did not sober up in time for the Monday noon rehearsal in Springfield. Annie Begley quieted Warrener with a bottle of Piper Heidsick. He opened it, imbibed it and returned for more. "Let's be friends," Annie said to him. She smacked him with a large wet kiss as the train pulled into the Springfield station.

Frankie Regan rode in the Mercedes with Ken to Springfield. The powerful car clung to the smooth surface of the Post Road. "We're in for a wild tour with this show," Frankie said. "You'll love the road. And if you don't, you can still get drunk in Podunk. Jules Monroe has put some of his best chicken in the line. You'll find Jimmie Durazzo a swell egg. We'll traipse around together, and by the time you hit Boston you'll forget Howard ever lived."

"I'm glad he's on his way to Europe," Ken said. "I'm glad I didn't go with him."

"You have the conscience of a saint," Frankie replied. "Suppose you had gone along, what then?"

"I am selfish. I wanted to be free. Frankie, I'm through eating my heart out. I'm through with what he calls lyric love and emotional orgasms."

"Meaning what?"

"I'm going gay."

Frankie took a flask from his pocket. "Have one, buddy?"

"No, sistie."

"Why not?"

"I gotta bring this bus to dock safe. Tomorrow after the show, we'll start the real lapping up. You pick your own shots, Frankie, and I'll play the game my way."

"My way is your way," said Frankie. "Let's go."

The Springfield theatre reminded Ken of Southern California days. It seemed lazily provincial, dishearteningly small-townish.

The entire cast was homesick. Old timers, like Rosemary Rose and Annie Begley, bravely fought their way through the indifference of the Monday audience to earn their quota of encores.

Ken's spirit was gone. He had lost the incentive to do his best. No magnet of ambition lifted him to his feet; no lovable friend stood in the wings, watching him, applauding him. This audience was stolid and unappreciative. Beyond the theatre wall lay an alien city. He was anxious to get the show over with, to find some other outlet for emotions and energy which were clashing within him. Rising before him as he danced was the figure of Howard, Howard whom he had sent alone to Europe. Howard had been New York and New York had been Howard. Now he had neither.

After the number, in his dressing room, narrow, dusty, cobwebs suspended from its ceiling corners, he examined himself in the mirror. He was at the apex of the pyramid. Youth flushed in his cheeks as he removed the make-up. His eyes peering at the reflection of his eyes, saw, however, no longer that frank expression which had been theirs on the day he first met Howard. They were harder eyes, colder eyes.

Frankie entered. "We can't do much in this town, Joe says."

"Who's Joe?" Ken asked.

"Durazzo. Come in, Joe." He held the door open. A stocky square-shouldered Italian entered. Ken remembered him as one of the new dancers. His hair was stringy and brown, his eyes shiftily blue, his chin firm, his hand clasp moist.

"Joe's been around the loop eighteen times," Frankie commented.

"Yeh, I been hoofing on the road for plenty of years. I was in Julie's first show, which gives you an idea."

"You must be over thirty."

"Over forty and I can still outlook most of the marcelined twists—without corsets."

"What about a little fun tonight?" Ken asked.

"Show people only," Joe said quickly. "I'm offa cruising towns of this type. The cops don't understand."

Ken opened a drawer of his trunk. "Is nipping allowed?"

"If you nip quick," Joe said.

Ken took a bottle of cognac from the drawer. "Gift of Gran'pa Colman." He opened it. "Joe, you round up whatever you can, male or female—after you dig into your first drink."

At five o'clock, a faint glow in the hotel court yard, a melancholy gray splotch, announced the rising sun. In the three-room suite which Ken had engaged in the Colonial Hotel, the party was ending. He teetered dizzily on his toes, placed an affectionate arm around Joe Durazzo's shoulder.

"You got great friends," he said. "I like you, Joe." He slipped a ten-dollar bill in the Italian's hand.

"I'll stay with you, Mr. Gracey, to help you to bed," Joe said.

"I c'n take care of myself. Where's Frankie?"

"He's gone to bed."

"Sensible Frankie," Ken said. "I'll go to bed." He closed the door on Joe. It had been a grand party. How the dirt had splashed! What joy to be untrammelled, to do what you please and to say whatever pops on your tongue!

Ken swayed before the mantel mirror. His hair was rumpled where Frankie had curled it in skewers when, draped in a checkered table cloth borrowed from the hotel dining room, he did the Samanthy Jane bit.

What a party-hound Joe was! You'd never know he was that clever; dull, colorless Joe, who sat in a corner, watched the guests arrive, prepared drinks, offered suitable suggestions, stunts and otherwise made himself useful. Ken decided to engage him as a dresser at once. He liked that Joe, the old tart.

As for the others: Georgie-Porgie Keene, the handsome blond youth from Pittsburgh who graced the party with his baritone solos and who suddenly got drunk enough to sing the famous "Bucket of Violets," a song Ken had never heard before, a racy Rabelaisian chantey which made everyone rock with laughter.

Georgie, so they whispered, was "profesh," and then only when he was well paid. He was handsome, firmly-built, a boy who was good looking enough to be in the movies, Ken thought, instead of the road troupe of "Sweeter than Sweet."

Inkie Ward was the tall, lean youth whose rapier-like

wit was at its sharpest when he thought of something off-color—and he thought of nothing else. "I'm at my best in drag," Inkie explained, "but I'll do some high-kicks that make you ashamed of yourself." In dancing strap and not much else, Inkie vied with Ken at the interesting game of kicking at the moon. Ken, as usual, won.

Veane West was quieter, round faced, soft, like a pudgy girl. He objected to profanity, carried his handkerchief in his sleeve, used his hands with fascinating grace and powdered his nose occasionally, using a tiny "compact" and holding the mirror meantime expertly in his palm. He shared a room with Inkie, who explained that Veane could only be a sister to him, a darling sister, and nothing more.

Two chorus girls had been invited by Joe. One was, like himself, an Italian, a blonde Italian descended from the mixed Teuton and Latin race of north Italy. Her features were of classic mould, a thoughtful blue-eyed Diana she seemed—and Diana Mirina was her name. She had joined the "Sweeter Than Sweet" troupe early in the summer at the same time her husband, Johnny Keeler, had been engaged to fill a small part abandoned by another actor. At first used only as an extra dancer, Diana was now regularly in the chorus line.

Of Jean Pond, who brought Diana to Ken's suite, Frankie whispered: "A real egg. Lots of fun. Knows all the ropes." Jean was the oldest chorus girl in the show. She drank steadily all night, favoring straight alcohol, not even diluting it with coca cola in the fashion Ken had imported from Selma. In Jean's retinue was "Zigzag," a shaggy West Highland terrier who nestled in his mistress' lap whenever she sat down. Between Diana and Zigzag Jean was too busy to pay much attention to the boys.

The third woman present had been Mitzi Black, the slim yellow maid Rosemary Rose had engaged for the road troupe. Mitzi, so Joe said, could be made to perform if enough liquor was poured down the inside of her neck. Straight alkie did the trick. She changed clothes and sex with Georgie Porgie, and with a black cigar in her mouth, entertained the party with low-down Harlem obscenities. Unhappily, she had passed out soon afterwards and Joe, good old Joe, had taken her to her room in the boarding house for colored artists, around the corner.

Gone now, they were all gone. The party was over. Ken turned from the mirror to the room. The acrid odor of alcohol still filled his nostrils. Empty bottles, crushed cigarettes, ash-strewn carpets—he unsteadily crossed to the bedroom door.

He was alone. It was dawn. Exhausted by the long night, he sank to his knees. He rested against the door for a time. At last he rose to undress. When he was free of his garments, he entered the bedroom, into which the pale morning light peered gingerly, as if afraid to reveal the disordered bed, the stale liquor in glasses on the dresser-top.

He toppled face down on the bed. This weariness was good. Sleep, like death, would come easily. He would not have to think.

The door vibrated. House Detective John J. McInerney struck it again and again with his fist. The gold ring on his little finger cut into his skin. He turned to Mitzi Black.

"If you'll prefer charges, I'll open the door. If you don't, I can't."

"You mean arrest him?" the negress asked hesitantly.

"Yes."

"I gotta find that purse," she spoke almost apologetically. Then anger pitched her voice high; "I'll put all the damn fairies in jail."

At ten o'clock that morning, Ken Gracey, wondering if he were not dreaming, stepped from the detention pen to a place before the desk of the municipal court clerk. Annie Begley greeted him with a broad grin.

"I paid your fine," she chuckled. "They sure were ready to hang you. What kind of yeggs did you have in your room last night?" The old comedienne slipped an arm around Ken's waist, "Still lit?" she asked.

"I need coffee and ham and eggs," he said.

"And a night's sleep."

"Nonsense, I'll be fresh tonight."

"As a corpse."

"What happened to the others?"

"They'll have to get out as best they can. The judge wined and lobstered me when I was a chorus girl in 'The Belle of New York.' That's how I got you out. I'm not going to pay fines for all the c. s's in show business!"

The clerk handed Ken a receipt. "A jail bird at last," he laughed. "Come on—let's breathe the air of freedom."

"You may laugh—but it could have been serious. Who stole the dinge's purse?"

"How much was in it?" Ken asked.

"Her money for the week."

"And the fine?"

"Ten dollars for disorderly conduct."

"I'll give you a check for fifty dollars, Annie. You give Mitzi forty—"

"But don't you want to find the thief?"

"Why should I?" Ken asked. "I had fifty dollars' worth of fun last night. I'm willing to pay."

Following the performance that night, Ken sent for Joe Durazzo. As he entered the dressing-room, Ken locked the door.

"What's up?" the Italian asked.

"How much did you pay the city of Springfield this morning?"

"Ten dollars. Why?"

"I'm not going to ask you any questions, Tootsie. I'm going to sock you in the jaw." Ken's long arm shot out. His bare fist cracked against Durazzo's chin. The chorus man staggered. His eyes opened in amazement.

"Wh—why—"

"No back talk, Joe. I know you took it."

"But Ken—"

"Tell the truth."

"I took it. Eleven dollars—she was blotto. I couldn't help snatching it."

"Sit down."

Ken put a hand on the Italian's shoulder. "I'm going to need you in my business on this trip," he said. "I can have you fired and will, if you misbehave again."

"What do you want me to do?"

"First, be honest. If you steal a cigarette from me, I'll have you kicked off the stage by Equity."

"O. K. Ken—but I didn't know you cared about niggers. What if I did rob the dinge?"

"I don't care for them—being a Southerner—but I can't stand a thief. Now there's a couple of other things on my mind. I want you to be my dog robber—take care of my

clothes, dressing me when you're not busy dressing yourself. Be a regular valet to me. I'll pay you for that."

"That's all right with me."

"And finally, this is my first trip around the circuit. It's your eighteenth or so."

"That's right."

"I'm out for a good time. I need a guide. I want to hit the high spots. And make no mistakes en route. You're a friend of Ernie Emerson's, aren't you?"

"That queen?"

"No kidding."

"You bet he is."

"When I get to Boston, I want to throw a party for him."

"He won't let you. He goes in for that sort of thing himself. I hear he took care of you in New York before I joined the show."

Ken flashed the platinum wrist watch before Joe's eyes.

"You're in," Joe chuckled, "or at least part way."

"In more ways than one—"

"If you want to be. But—" Joe looked around, "you ain't got nothing to wear at a drag, have you?"

"No."

"I'll take you where you gotta go for the right kind of togs, when we hit Boston."

"Right you are, Josie." He held a hand outstretched to the Italian. "Is it agreed?"

"And how!"

Joe shook Ken's hand. Ken nodded in the direction of the corridor. "Unlock the door," he said, "and get Frankie and that Jean Pond. Tonight we'll have a quiet, private party."

From the drawer he took a bottle of "alkie." He gulped a raw mouthful. The crude spirits seared fiercely into his stomach.

"You shouldn't drink that stuff straight, Ella," Joe remarked as he turned to go. "Bad for the brain."

"I don't need a brain," Ken said soberly. "Brains remember. I want to forget."

XVIII

"SWEETER THAN SWEET" floated into Boston on a sea of liquor. The opening night's performance was a ribald echo of the show which had entertained New York audiences for nine months. Yet the Boston first-nighters were pleased and the newspaper critics, skillfully lured into the box-office where six quarts of imported Scotch stood on a desk, wrote notices in which the words, "brilliant," "clever," "modern," "unique" were scattered.

Ken rented a house on the Fenway. Frankie lived with him. Joe occupied the maid's room; he was valet, chauffeur and cook.

Ken played the opening performance with a skillful simulation of the sober, earnest performer. Only Norah noticed his condition. He had arrived in Boston drunk and drunk he still was. He passed Norah's dressing-room on the way to the street; he looked in. She was crying, her eyes rimmed with red. He entered, laughed at her for being homesick, kissed her and hurried out.

Three days passed before his mind cleared. Four nights of "open house" on the Fenway, nights ending after dawn, days passed in sodden sleep.

On Wednesday, during the performance, a liveried chauffeur called at the theatre. He handed Ken a note.

"I have made an appointment for you with Madame Richards tomorrow at five," Ken read. "If you can't keep it, notify my man." At the bottom was the over-elaborate

"E" which Ken recognized as the signature of Ernie Emerson. "I'll be there," Ken said. "What's the idea? And who's Madame Richards?"

"Mr. Emerson is entertaining on Saturday evening, sir," the chauffeur replied. "I imagine he wants Madame Richards to help you choose a costume for the occasion."

The Madame Richards whom Ken visited the next afternoon had once been secretary to Gaston Darsec, a *premier* of the *Haute Couture* in Paris. Her *atelier*, just off Boylston Street, reflected the good taste acquired when she stood at Darsec's elbow, sketching designs that were later to find their way into style exhibitions in Paris, London and New York. In those days her name had been Juliette Chandeaum and she was striking in appearance, a dark wisp of black hair over a keen olive-skinned face. Now, Juliette Chandeaum, re-named Mme. Richards, was a fat, dominant woman of fifty, who wore a man's shirt, cravat, striped waistcoat, spats, and a severely cut gray skirt, the latter her only concession to her own sex. Unquestionably, Madame's styles *pour les dames* were an accurate reflection of the evolution of costume as decreed by the gods of the Rue de la Paix. Boston, that is to say, the Boston which clung to Back Bay and the Charles River backdrop—considered Madame a trifle extreme. Her modernistic drawing room was well patronized, however, by actresses, debutantes and the exotics, who desired that extraordinary *recherché* quality in dress which only Madame knew how to create.

A turbaned colored boy in the costume of a Moroccan sheik swung open the door of Madame Richards' establishment. Ken entered; his eye was attracted to the black spiral which, coiled against ivory, supplied a ceiling and floor, a dominant design to Madame's salon. The spiral

ended in a circle at the center of the room where Madame herself stood. She advanced toward Ken.

"Monsieur Gracey, I believe."

Ken, fortified by several brandies, was amused. "Charmed to meet you," he said, bowing low. "I want to see something ducky—a sailor suit—or maybe I'll go as Little Bo-Peep."

Contempt was written in the black eyes of Madame. Ken's spirit of mischievous raillery died.

"I am not a costumer," she said. "You are privileged to have me attend you. I do so only because of your patron."

Considerably subdued, Ken followed Madame into a room of dazzling canary brocaded satin walls, where a yellow and black Macaw sat on a bar high in a corner, staring resentfully at the intruder.

"I shall show you some newer models that may suit your figure and complexion," Madame said.

"What's the idea?" Ken asked.

"Didn't he tell you?"

"Who is he?"

"Oh, so you are a visitor here, eh?"

"In show business."

"Dancer?"

"Yes."

"I am not permitted to mention the name of your friend. If you were a Bostonian you would understand that we do not invite trouble by mentioning names." She produced a cigar case from a pocket of her waistcoat and proceeded to light it before she continued: "He is giving a party Saturday night at the mansion. I presume there will be a style display."

"So I'm to go in 'drag'?"

"Naturally."

"Heavenly—divine," Ken laughed. "I'll love it. Where is the mansion?"

"That, too, I am not privileged to say. I do not know."

Ken was guided in his choice of the cloth of gold gown by Madame. For more than an hour, he watched a fashion parade displayed on the figures of Madame's girls. With impersonal seriousness the models showed Ken the latest styles. It was Madame herself who made the final decision. Her secretary, whom she called Mimi Minetta, was a business-like little woman, distinguished mainly by the perceptible blond moustache she wore on her upper lip. She measured Ken from head to foot.

"Tomorrow, we will fit you, on Saturday at six, the try-on. As for the foundation, wig and other details—leave that to me."

The prospect of attending a "drag" colored Ken's mood to vivid scarlet. He was thrilled. He pivoted with unconcealed impatience for the hour of the party. Between the matinee and evening shows that Saturday, he visited Madame's atelier for the final fitting.

Serious Mlle. Minetta admitted Ken to the little room of canary and black.

"I presume, Monsieur has brought none of the appurtenances for the costume," she said.

"Meaning what?" Ken asked.

"Pads—straps—and so on."

"Nothing."

"In that case, may I suggest you permit me to dress you? Madame tells me this is your *début*."

"This will be my entrance into Boston society."

"Then you have been in costume elsewhere?"

"Oh no. Never in costume."

"If you will permit, monsieur, undress, please. You naturally wear a supporter?"

"Certainly," Ken said. "I'm sure I shouldn't—"

She barely smiled. "I will return presently, with everything else," she said and disappeared into the recesses of the atelier. A few minutes later as Ken, nude except for his strap, was powdering his body, she re-entered bearing his evening gown and a cardboard box containing the "foundation."

"It's *chic, hein?*" she asked as she showed him the gown. "And now," she opened the box, "the *brassière*. It is manufactured to order for Madame. These pads will embellish the line of the gown. Here, as you will notice, is a rubber cup which compresses the flesh so as to create the desired effect."

"Clever," Ken commented. "What else?"

"I know you will adore these," she said, revealing nearly transparent underthings. "You will, of course, shave your legs tonight for the stockings, which, by the way, have not yet arrived. As for slippers, Madame has selected half a dozen pair in the correct shade intended to give the appearance of a small foot. You may choose the most comfortable."

She lifted the cover of a smaller box. "The wig is of a natural titian; do you admire it?"

"Will it fit?" Ken asked.

"It cannot fail to fit. Now as to the gloves—they are not to be worn this season. Paris says they should be carried in the left hand. The wrap is rented. You will return it.

When the costume is complete you will look naturally beautiful."

"Naturally," echoed Ken.

"Unnaturally," commented Mimi Minetta, with a twinkle in her eye.

Shortly after midnight a graceful, beautiful young woman was escorted to a waiting limousine by Madame, who enthusiastically characterized her as, "*Ravissante, vetue au dernier cri.*"

"If I could make mesdames of Back Bay as *chic* as you," she said, "I would be rich."

Ken sank back into the cushions of the car with which Ernie Emerson had provided him. It sped on, through a sleeping city into a road paralleling the Atlantic shore. As Ken opened his hand bag, the diamond Emerson had given him sparkled on his finger. From the bag he drew a card.

"Your name is Cara," he read. He smiled. "Cara," he said aloud. "I wonder what that means?"

At first glance, the mansion appeared to be an old dilapidated house seated on a slight rise west of the North Shore road. It was wide, with ample wings which rambled off on both sides. And it was ancient. The chestnut trees of solid girth which lined the driveway were now nearly bare of leaves. On the broad old porch, figures were moving in silhouette against the windows.

In the mansion, an old-time governor of Massachusetts had lived and died. Succeeding generations had added new wings until what had once been a self-contained Colonial homestead was now a hodge-podge of rooms varying in size from the huge ball-room, with its balcony boxes, to tiny

cupboard-like bed chambers which in by-gone days had been improvised beneath the slanting shelter of the stairs.

The mansion had been abandoned as a residence in the '90's, when an aging, penurious maiden lady, last survivor of a pre-Revolutionary family, had passed away. She had used only three of the mansion's countless rooms. After her death, no one wanted the vast, ramshackle and decaying house. One day, an auctioneer disposed of many valuable antiques. Then thirty years passed by the tenantless house, its taxes paid out of the fund derived from the sale of the furniture. At last, Ernie Emerson purchased it and had transformed it into a playhouse. The vivid taste of the jeweler arrogantly superseded the mild monotonies of the past. Color, color and more color, was Emerson's demand. Walls, which had been chastely bare, now blared with cerises and salmons; bedrooms blazed in oranges and lavers, pale blues and shocking purples. Many of the rooms were over-furnished; lamps were shaded in all the hues of the spectrum; coats of mail hung vacantly in unexpected corners; huge Spanish chests were large enough to contain the gold plate of an emperor; pennants flung on walls, tapestries flapping nearby, paintings scattered between.

The ball-room, now kaleidoscopic with moving figures, still retained some of its ancient dignity. Emerson had re-decorated it but he could not change its effective spaciousness nor the contour of the balcony boxes which faced a platform upon which a jazz band now brayed. In the foremost box, where once a haughty Colonial matron had received congratulations on the marriage of her daughter to a gentleman of Louis XVI's bed chamber, Emerson, attired in severe and correct evening dress, now sat.

He was flushed a deep pink. In his left hand he held a

narrow stemmed wide-mouthed glass which contained a small quantity of Napoleon brandy. His eyes sparkled. His lips were moist. The veins in his temples bulged purplish with excitement.

On the ball-room floor, jutting from the slightly elevated band platform, was a runway. As the music stopped, a drummer beat a tattoo which was followed by a long, echoing roll. A slim, dark haired young man appeared. His face was wreathed in smiles. He held his hands, palms forward, in a pantomimed plea for silence. The figures on the floor, seemingly richly clad women dancing with their escorts, continued to chatter. The drum rolled again. The young man cried: "Please. Silence—please!" The thin, high chatter died down, then stopped.

"Boys," said the young man, "—and girls—" He grinned. "I know you are having an elegant time. The music is swell, the eats are the last word and, say, did you ever see such a collection of good things to drink anywhere?"

Several voices cried, "It's great!" A feminine tone piped, "Speed up, tootsie!" The crowd laughed.

"Mr. Emerson, our host," the young man continued, "has generously offered several wonderful prizes this year to the winners of the beauty contest. You have examined them, I am sure, in the glass case at the foot of the main stairs. Mr. Emerson is delighted to note that so many of you have come here tonight. Now if everyone will take places at the tables along the walls, the show will begin."

Nearly five hundred names had been on the guest list, several coming from Chicago to the annual "drag" at the Emerson mansion. More than half of this number were in women's costumes, varying from modish gowns in the

latest styles to scanty bathing suits. Faces tinted with rouge, lashes beaded, lids shaded, jewelry pendant on bosoms or circling arms and fingers, they moved with a semblance of feminine grace.

At the beginning of the evening, the guests had apparently been intimidated by the grandeur of the mansion. They had greeted each other with little cries of surprise. Beulah kissed Molly whom she had not seen for ages. Buddy embraced Louella and whispered sweet nothings in her ear. Ernie Emerson stood at the threshold of the ball-room, inclining his head and smiling as each new guest arrived.

As the minutes flew, as the wine and brandy unchained tongues, voices rose in shrill cries, feminine gestures became more and more exaggerated; the dancing, at first, awkward and hesitant, now was a maelstrom of clinging bodies. Ernie's guests dropped caution and became bold, speaking loudly in flat imitations of women's voices, holding hands or even embracing. Then the roll of the drums and the announcement that the beauty contest was about to begin.

Ernie Emerson was alone when Ken entered the governor's box. He turned as the curtains parted.

"At last!" he said, rising. "I have been so anxious to see you."

"And I to see you," Ken replied.

"You're just in time for the contest. I want you to compete. Will you?"

Beneath Ernie's courteous tone, Ken felt an undercurrent of firmness.

"I have taken the trouble to enter your name myself. It is listed as Cara." He could read the hesitancy in Ken's eyes. "No one will know you. You are really beautiful."

"If you please," Ken's lips shaped a bud, "I'll show those Marjories who the best dressed flame is. How about it, Ernie?"

"Well," Emerson said with quiet surprise, "you *are* different. This *is* a pleasure."

The dressing-room, formerly the Governor's study, was crowded with contestants. Dressing tables had been provided. The contestants sat before mirrors, arranging details of their costumes. They watched newcomers closely, appraising their rivals' chances for success.

As Ken, tall, a graceful figure in cloth of gold, entered, he heard a voice say:

"It's in the bag. There goes Ernie's latest pansy."

He stood before a full length mirror. He saw the face of a refined and charming woman, whose eyes were sensuously heavy. She was not young. Her great sophistication lent her years which had not yet been lived by the young man upon whom she was superimposed. Her gown covered a synthetically perfect form. Her arms, whitened to soft ivory, were slender, but her neck was a trifle too long and her hands betrayed her. She was not really alive at all.

Ken's eyes examined his reflection with amusement. She studied him curiously. He moistened his lips, which parted in a half smile. Her teeth were revealed in the similar smile which she seemed to bestow upon him.

"Have you got a swig o' something on your hip, dearie?" he heard his neighbor at the dressing table on the right ask.

"No, I haven't," Ken replied. He looked curiously at the half-nude adolisque who sat there. "Ray Leech, or I'm a so and so! Are you lush or aren't you?"

"Be refined, Ken Gracey," Ray said. "I hear you're in."

"Meaning what?"

"You'll win the grand prize."

"Tish and tush, Ella," Ken said. "Who wants a diamond bracelet?"

"Pawnbrokers—at one third value, baby darling," the show boy replied. "I came all the way from New York to swing my precious hips on that runway. Is anyone else here from the show?"

"Not a soul. Frankie wasn't invited."

"Ernie is particular. Some of these belles are doctors and lawyers; and one, the fat lady who needs a couple of brassieres on her double chins, is the president of a bank."

"Just girls, ducky girls," Ken chimed.

"You are divine," Ray said. "What a pity you were born on a Friday."

"What's Friday?"

"Bitch's day, dearie, in the calendar of sin. Anyone as beautiful as you are can come to no good end."

"Who wants to come to a good end?" Ken mocked and went toward the runway.

To the unpractised eye, the figures that moved from portieres at the rear of the ball room through an aisle on the platform into the white blaze of spotlights were feminine. They walked with swaying bodies, arms poised, parading their costumes, preening themselves proudly as they exhibited their charms. The appearance of the first model was the signal for little cries of surprise and admiration. As the contest proceeded the hubbub grew. Favorites were hailed with "ah's" and "oh's"; their names bandied about the room, their chances appraised.

Two private policemen, who stood guard at the foot of

the runway, restrained enthusiastic revellers. Passions rose. The sight of so many delectable creatures clad in aphrodisiac silks was a powerful stimulant. Restraint fled. Like dancers at a masked ball, Ernie Emerson's guests were being titillated by the fascination of an atmosphere in which they might safely indulge their craving for forbidden fruit. Here was no cerebral sex game. Here was fleeting reality. Here life was almost too good to be true. The wanton sport, played privately, secretly, was here sport no longer. Good food stroked the palate; wine warmed the heart and beauty maddened the senses. Desires which had been covertly exposed, obliquely displayed, paraded here unashamed. Eyes moved eagerly now. Falsetto voices piped higher and higher; hands were arched in an unfelt caress as the manners of the hated female were mimicked, then exaggerated.

As the fashion display continued, the tense excitement grew.

"That fat Englishman over there," said Ray Leech, as Ken and he awaited their turns, "is a baronet, married, two children, an ancestral castle and a yen for small boys. Isn't he disgustingly fat?"

The object of Leech's remarks powdered his chest, moved the line of his *décolleté* up, then down; he fingered the marcel of his auburn wig.

"He can't go back to England," Leech added.

"Poor thing—" Ken said.

"He waited too long. It burst one day in a frightful orgy. Some one complained. He ran away and hid himself over here. He works as an interior decorator."

Some one called, "Cara."

"My turn," Ken said.

"Good luck," cried Ray Leech.

The diamond bracelet was on his wrist. It was four-thirty Monday morning. The "drag" had continued all day Sunday. He had been madly drunk. Vaguely he recalled a dance. He had stripped off his golden dress, his veil of silk. He had danced as he always wanted to dance—completely free of clothes, a living poem in flesh.

Then in a room with Ernie Emerson. He did not recall what he had done. Raging torrents of passion, even blows. Then sleep. When he awoke, the diamond bracelet was on his wrist, the diamond ring on his finger. A suit of men's clothes, shoes and undergarments lay at the foot of the deep, soft bed in which he had been sleeping.

His nerves jerked joltingly. He dressed. As he walked across the floor, he seemed to have awakened a negro servant who had been sleeping outside his door. Half an hour later, the negro was driving him back to Boston. The sun was already rising in mist over the ocean as the car came to a stop.

"What's the matter?" Ken asked.

The negro jumped down from his seat, opened the door of the car and said to Ken, "Git out."

"What for?"

"You can git a taxicab to town ovah yondah about a mile." He pointed to a factory building across a field.

"But I wanna go home."

The negro took a five dollar bill from his pocket. "This'll git you home. And gimme dem jewels."

"Who said so?" Ken's mind awakened to the significance of the man's actions.

"Or else—" threatened the negro. He held an automatic in his right hand.

"But Emerson gave these to me and you work for him, don't you?"

"Sure I do. Boy, things aren't what they used to be—even in the jewelry racket. Come on, come across. I could pot you and nobody would know—" He smiled broadly, "only you are too dawgone nice."

"Thanks for the compliment." The revolver suddenly slid against his ribs. "O.K.," Ken grinned. "You can have 'em."

"I don' git 'em, boss," said the negro as he took the bracelet and ring, "and neither do you. They're for Ernie. To be used next year. Now get out."

Ken obeyed. "Don' forget to tell the police," said the man. "They'd love to hear how you got 'em! And start walking—and don't look back."

Ken did not look back until the limousine was out of sight. He arrived home at eight in the morning. That night he danced so well that Norah remarked that he must have spent a restful week-end.

"You've guessed it right, Norrie," he laughed. "I went down to the sea."

"I'm glad," she said. "You needed the salt sea air."

"Which," Ken commented, "was about all I did get."

XIX

DEAR KEN,

I have been sitting by the window of my apartment—it is a bleak day and London is not inspiring on bleak days. The chill has been penetrating and the gas log is blue and gold. It occurs to me, as I watch a little bird, a starling, I think—that I am very calm, very contented.

I've been a long time over here—unconsciously I ape the London manner of speaking and writing. It gets into the bones, this city. Large and clammy in the winter but, if you trust yourself to the out-of-doors, heartily sound and comforting all the same, if you have sense to shut windows and light fires. As the months pass, I do the correct London things. I become more and more suited to this England. America, as I think I told you so many times, is disturbing. Too wide, too open, too conglomerate. Of course, New York is not. One can, you know, be rather happy in New York. Here, where one is unquestionably what one is, whether a clerk, an Earl, the propellor of a *char-à-banc*, or a composer of popular tunes, everyone is substantial. This feeling of being rooted in firm soil quiets me. Too, distance from you, from your unaccountably deep moods, has relieved my emotions. Because, you may be sure now, you communicated your unrest to me. I was a little wild-eyed those last weeks. I admit it. Your idea of my coming here at once was splendid. Thanks, old dear.

Thanks, indeed, but not for one kind word. I know per-

factly that you are not a prolific writer of letters. I did, however, anticipate a word from you. My only news comes from box-office statements father forwards to me, usually pleasing as to their totals, but unimaginatively devoid of news of you. Old Mike has been looking after the finances of the troupe; he even does me, his genius son, the service of mailing an occasional newspaper notice. Lately though, I have seen none; and I have not even been able to read your name in print.

I live quietly, work hard. Occasionally, a spree; mild one, of course. The other night at the Kit Kat I was taken unawares. A not unimposing young person sat alone in a corner. He reminded me of you, there in the shadow. I had the temerity to approach him. Thankful I was to learn that he knew me because of one of my silly tunes. He's an equerry, no less, a gentleman of what the British call substance and as unlike you as could be. Oxford, lineage, heraldic thingamabobs on his shirt sleeves and a superior air. But fond of music. If he had that blithe wit that was yours before you went gloomy on me, he'd be perfect. But spare thy tears, Penelope, that was all. I shan't, however, let him cut into my time as you did. Nor shall I flee from him to Montreal and be pursued. Shameless that was, now wasn't it? I still have the treasured cork from that last champagne bottle. Shameless again, am I not, to gloat? But I do. It was worth it.

I pray that you too have learned to savor things. I worried so about you. Your face, usually so inspiringly devilish, was black as night when you saw me off that Saturday. I half wondered, would it be suicide? And then I realized that you have too much sense not to be able to thrust yourself into fire and emerge unscathed. That blend

of you, raw American, rare dancer, vagabond, laughing boy and weeping sentimentalist, ah, you are a fantastic person! What made you grow so curiously? Why did folks never tell you? What made you not believe me when I told you I was a surface swimmer? The sea—and life—have no depth for me. You, my dear, must learn to avoid the rapids, the tides, the swifter currents. You must float—like me. A bleeding heart is not a pretty sight. Pull the zipper tight and show it never again.

Now it is January. You are teaching the dance to Cincinnati, this night. It will be bitter cold there and you should learn how to drink hot rum and heavy wines—if you can find them in Cincinnati. Soon you will be in Chicago, a long run, I trust; and in April, with my revue open here, I shall fly to you, fly to you.

In the meantime, cheerio, old dear, and a bit o' fluff be your heart, to toss on every wind that blows.

Your
HOWARD.

LIFE, according to Jean Pond, was a dizzy headache. You never get exactly what you want and when you do, you're always too drunk to know what to do with it.

"I useta think," said Jean to the glass of alkie, as she and Ken sat in an Atlantic City boardwalk café. "I don't any more. What the hell is there to think about except when to walk Zigzag, when to feed him and how to get through a show without using up too much energy?" She sniveled faintly. "You're a good egg, Kennie," she continued. "Joe says so. So does Frankie. So do I. You hold your liquor swell, you always crack wise polite sorta; and you've been born so that you'll never be a nuisance to a gal like me.

"That's what I like about you. No pretense. Say, it took me a long time to get hep to myself. I'm still drinking because of it. You, too. You drink as much as me." She sighed. "If we was bi-sex, what a life we'd live. If I could, wouldn't I go for you? And you for me?" She repeated the words: "You for me and me for you," then hummed: "Two for tea and tea for two . . ." Her voice trailed off. . . . "All I got is a yen for Diana and my sweet little cute little Zigzag."

On this evening Ken's only companion was Jean. Diana had been claimed by her husband. Johnny Keeler did not drink. He read a great deal and was, Jean said, writing a play. "Johnny's not Diana's type. It's ridiculous." Jean was frankly jealous of Johnny. She made no secret of her

plan. She was going to separate husband and wife. Ken listened with amusement to her bitter attack on that "lazy good-for-nothing ham actor, who thinks he can write."

"Di is horribly unhappy," she explained. "It's his fault. While he's around she's a rag. I'm going to smash that combination. I'm going to drive him away from her. It isn't her fault. She was brought up wrong. Her mother was too strict—an old country Catholic. Mine wasn't strict enough."

Later that night they visited a negro dance hall. Jean knew the tall straight-featured yellow youth who managed the affair. Soon Ken was watching white-teethed black boys dance in the ill-ventilated dusty ball-room. Bronze faces rouged, heavy lips penciled, in bright colored gowns, the dancers drank alkie until their tawny skins shone. They cuddled and cursed and brawled. The "Grand Carnival," as it was called, was held in an abandoned lodge hall near the negro streets. It was guarded by a dozen white policemen, several of whom forgot official duties and danced on the floor with nimble-footed partners. As the hours of the night slipped by, the number of whites increased. Slim sailors and square-shouldered marines from the Philadelphia Navy Yard scattered among the dancers. Two bands sustained a continuous throbbing rhythm.

At four o'clock, word was passed from mouth to mouth that a "pinch" was about to be made. One of the policemen arrested two brown skinned youths who were singing a "low-down." The boys were incongruously dressed as Oriental dancers and had been performing what they considered to be a mild version of the stomach dance. A few minutes later the doors of the hall were snapped closed. Tension grew. Voices rose. The dance became a Baccha-

nalian revel. Ken took no part in the riotous action. He was revolted by the stench of sweat, the animal odor of writhing bodies. When he saw a razor flash and heard a scream, he seized Jean's arm and led her through the rear door to the back stairs and safety.

"Sweeter than Sweet" played three weeks in Philadelphia. Ken, flanked by Frankie and Joe, occupied a suite in "The Madhouse," as the Great Western Hotel for the theatrical profession was popularly known. The Great Western, operated by a complacent manager, catered to chorus people, although it usually numbered among its guests the thirstier, gayer musical comedy principal players. The presence of a principal was sufficient excuse for the institution of what was locally termed "open house," an institution made possible by frequent bribes openly paid to a portly house detective, who made his rounds twice nightly, once to collect his fees, again for his share of the drinks.

Three violent weeks rushed by. Ken became the host of hosts in "The Madhouse." His door was always open. He slept rarely, leaving the hotel only to dance at the theatre. Word spread that Ken was "a good guy," a drink-buyer. Chorus people from two other musical shows playing in Philadelphia crowded the suite. Boys from the streets drifted in. Within a few days, Ken neither knew nor cared who his guests were. They slept in his bed, littered the floor with cigarette stubs and cigar ashes. Ken did not seem to mind.

Joe Durazzo resented the intrusion of strangers. Frankie and his allies from the show felt Ken was being subjected to the derision of those who were enjoying his hospitality. At first Ken was too "high" to care. But when, one morn-

ing, he heard a particularly shocking epithet flung at him, his face lost its amiable smile.

"Who's that big he-man over there?" he asked Jean.

"A lush—that's all," she said.

Through the open door of the kitchenette in which they stood, Ken saw a red-faced bald-headed man who had introduced himself as a local journalist. He was boldly pilfering a pint of rye. A quarrel began. Ken shoved the petty thief into the hall. He was still furious when Jean succeeded in inducing him to leave the suite for a moment.

"I'm goofy from the racket," she said. "Why don't you put them all out and go to bed?"

"No. I don't want to do that," he told her.

"Then let's take a walk."

It was six o'clock. The morning air was raw with a northeast wind. The streets were deserted. For several minutes they did not talk.

"I coulda killed that guy," Ken said. "I've never felt that way before. It scares me."

Jean stopped. "Let's turn back to the hotel," she suggested. "Do you want my advice?"

"Yes."

"Separate the sheep from the wolves or you'll be the goat."

"Meaning what?"

"A fight—trouble—jail."

They paced the gray streets. "You mean I should separate US from them?" he finally asked.

"I do," she said. "They insult you, and you infuriate them. They talk about you behind your back and you're too polite to get sore."

When they returned to the suite, Ken told Joe to oust quietly all who did not belong.

"Belong to what?"

"To the other world," Ken heard Frankie say.

"The what?" Ken asked.

"The other world," Frankie repeated. "They *are* different, aren't they?"

"Our world—the other world—" Ken repeated the words to himself. They were significantly simple. The world sharply divided, a line of cleavage between. The others, aliens, invaders, easily recognized. Just look into eyes. In our world, mild eyes, amused eyes, suggestive eyes, perhaps perverse eyes, yet always friendly eyes of those who love life. The others, steely eyes, fish eyes, cold eyes, resentful, suspicious, dangerous. Ken was, he knew now, a naturalized citizen of "our world." He had quit the old scheme of things, entered a new and happier region where life raced by so speedily that one never learned how to care. And here he knew he would remain forever.

"Below Decks" was a frame house on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. It lay high and dry on a lane many miles from the water. Its outer door, an impregnable barrier of reinforced concrete and steel, was operated by electricity. Fifteen reputed millionaires owned "Below Decks." To enter it was to forget that one was ashore. The interior was decorated as a palatial yacht. Port holes took the place of windows; through them one saw a moving panorama of ocean; one could almost hear the restless roar of the sea.

Ken, together with his friends of the company, were entertained by the Fifteen. As they entered, drab, ugly masculine clothes were exchanged for costumes provided

by the hosts. One could appear as an elegant lady, a demure maid, a ship's captain, a simple seaworthy seaman.

Alcohol mixed with ginger ale was the only drink. Scattered about the "yacht" were cabins, occupants of which could avoid intrusion by pressing a button which caused a red light to appear outside their doors.

In the basement was a tiny dance floor, a bar and booths where those who did not care to drink might sit and watch their fellows. Here, behind barred doors and windows, the last shreds of pretense were flung away. For the first time Ken listened to a philosophical exposition of what his companion, an austere non-drinking man of forty, dressed in the comfortable robe of a monk, described as the inevitable spread of homosexuality.

"It's the logical result of modern tendencies," he said. "The feminization of men is due to the breakdown in the paternalistic world. A boy no longer can aspire to become an all-powerful head of his house. He envies his elegantly dressed toil-free mother, his gentle school teacher, his sheltered sisters, their colorful clothes and their lovely bodies. If he is rich, he enjoys the thrill of changing sex. If he is poor—ah, there I have a rare theory. The poor boy is driven by blind instinct toward race suicide. What has the modern world to offer so completely uninhibited as the freemasonry of our kind? Women hate each other. Men are natural enemies of each other. We of the third sex enjoy perfect love, fruitless love. We are not fecund. We create no evil. For us, life is all. No false conception of immortality. No sons to jibe at us. No soul to perish in eternal damnation. No jealous wives hovering over us, no laws barring our free association with each other."

The mild monk—he was, Ken learned, a university pro-

fessor—did not join in the brutal derision which greeted every mention of “the others.” He told Ken to be happy in his youth. “Go,” he said, “drink. I do not, only because of my shrivelling kidneys.”

And Ken drank. Soon he sparkled, became the center of all attention as he sang, danced and laughed his way through the night. When the raw liquor strangled the laugh in his throat, he suddenly realized that he had been indifferent to the attentions of two of the millionaires, one a narrow-faced, bald-headed ship’s cook, with blue-veined nose and thin-lipped mouth; the other a dignified white-haired, round-cheeked admiral.

The ship’s cook threw a silver ash tray at the admiral. He missed a direct hit. A giant (“He’s surely a eunuch,” whooped Frankie) locked the cook in the brig, “until,” said the admiral, “he sobers up.”

Ken liked the admiral. He decided to dance for him. He stripped off his costume and improvised until the room whirled madly.

When he awoke, in the admiral’s cabin, he found a thousand dollar bill in his shoe.

Ken streaked through the cities of the east in the parabolic path of a meteor, his devoted court attending him. At the end of each performance new admirers appeared, waiting patiently until he emerged from the theatre. Men, always men. Women seemed to know. From men he received perfumed notes, invitations to dinners, parties, week-ends. Gifts, he realized, might result in an unwelcome obligation; he returned them to their senders. He was not always able to avoid the curiosity of those who wanted to meet him. Their soft voices called as he walked to his

hotel; their fluttering hands protested that he was ignoring them. His dance, his grace, his personality attracted them with impelling magnetism. Pittsburgh blended gently into Cincinnati. Liquor soothed Ken's nerves, created a falsely tonic effect, provided him with a sense of elation. He now played his role in "Sweeter Than Sweet" with mechanical perfection, dancing, however, with almost imperceptible lack of that spontaneous *élan* which won applause. Pulse always quick, a laugh on his dry lips, a witty rejoinder ready for every new sally on the part of his companions, he saw Cincinnati become Cleveland. Time and space fused in a long round of drinks, jokes, love-making. His day began at dusk. Breakfast at five. Details attended to by Joe. The theatre. New faces. A flirtation. A rendezvous. Liquor, blazing liquor. Forgetfulness, blank annihilation. And always a bed for the day, a pay check on Saturday, and a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of energy. Sleep, he knew, was his enemy. He was afraid to go to bed in the dark. Dawn, he said, was early enough. The light drove bad dreams away. His pillow never soft, the sheets never cool nor soothing, he tossed into replenishing deep sleep; for, adrift on that searing sea of alcohol, he sank into unconsciousness.

Then, one week-end, he arrived in Chicago. Familiar streets. Reminiscent faces. Norah's chatter about the old days, three years ago, when they had broken in their act, then played their first musical show roles. Dimly Ken remembered a time when had been eagerly ambitious, ridiculously anxious to go to New York, to become a Broadway star.

Odd that now he *was* a Broadway star, returning to Chi-

cago. As the taxi moved through traffic to his hotel, he turned to Joe.

"I'm going to taper off on the booze," he said.

"In Chicago?" Joe asked.

"Why not? Norah's been complaining. And I'm getting jittery."

"But we've got things to do in Chicago," Joe said.

Monday morning's orchestra rehearsal was over when Norah cornered Ken in the stage door alley.

"You were 'way off the tempo, Ken," she complained.

"I never noticed it. I'm sorry, Norrie."

"I wouldn't mind but—"

"I'll be all right tonight. I haven't had an eyeopener. I'm still tasting blue, black and brown blotting paper."

She took his hand. "Ken," she said. "Why are you changing so? You're somehow not the same as you used to be."

With the simple sincerity of a small boy who is being scolded, he asked: "In what way, Norrie?"

"I always smell liquor on your breath, Ken," she said. "Why do you drink?"

"I never drink in the theatre," he defensively explained. "I was only kidding about that eye-opener."

"But, Ken, you go with such funny people. I hear such queer stories about you. And you always say such brutal things now—as if your mind was changing, too. Why, you haven't said a sensible thing to me in weeks."

"I'm sorry."

"This morning," she continued, "you are a little bit the way you used to be. Your eyes are quieter. You don't laugh all the time. You—" She turned away.

"I don't know," he said.

"But at night, you look sometimes the way you did in Tia Juana. You know, mother said then she thought you needed someone to mother you. She didn't have the nerve herself."

He placed an arm around Norah's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll be all right."

That night, Johnny Keeler quit the show. The lanky blond youth handed a two-weeks' notice to the stage manager.

Ken heard the news from Jean, who was gloating. "Di doesn't care," she said. But Diana, it was apparent, still cared. Between acts, she met her husband in the corridor just outside Ken's dressing-room.

"You've disgraced me," Ken heard Keeler say. "You're living with her now, not with me. I'm mad enough to walk out on you. I don't care if I ever work in a show again. I'm taking a train back to New York."

Diana had hardened. Her skin was now gray beneath rouge; her eyes were frequently glazed and cold.

"You're always drunk now, going around with those jennies. It's a wonder the show stays open with Gracey and his mob in it."

Ken, listening, did not move. He sat in his dressing-room, the door ajar. He heard Keeler's voice rise. "Can't you get mad? Don't you feel anything any more? Has she dried up your heart, too?"

She replied in a low tone. Ken could not catch her words. Her voice rose. He heard her say: "I hate you!" Keeler's voice broke. "I don't hate you," he said. Then footsteps.

In the mirror Ken saw Diana's troubled face. "You heard?" she asked.

"I did."

"It's too bad."

She sat down. Her lip trembled. "I'm not going to cry," Diana said. But a sob rose in her throat. She crushed it. "What's the matter with me?" she demanded.

"Want a drink?" Ken asked.

"No," she replied. "Ken," she suddenly said, "I didn't like you at first. Now I do. Jean made me understand. Listen, Ken. Tell me. Was I wrong?"

"You couldn't be wrong where Keeler's concerned," Ken replied.

"It isn't all Johnny," she explained. "You gotta understand me too. I don't blame him much. He's a one-idea boy. As for me, I was never nowhere when I was a kid. Never had a boy friend. My mother told me nothing. Only to be sweet and good. And I guess that don't go in show business."

"Show business . . ." Ken laughed bitterly. "Merry-go-round, you mean. Hipped up beautifully from night to morning and earning hundreds a week. You're a funny Clara to be in show business. Too serious."

She smiled faintly. "Don't I know it? I was brought up that way. My mother thought she was violating God's law and man's when she sent me to dancing school. That was the only kick I got outa being a kid. One day I went over to Broadway from Brooklyn and tried out at a chorus call.

"They took me. I rehearsed like mad and before I knew it, the show was opening in Wilmington and I was staring at a swell looking kid crossing the stage.

"Ken . . . I can tell you. I fell for Johnny. We got

married, Ken, and, oh, instead of it being all peaches and cream and honey, it was hell. Every time it was pain, terrible awful torture. At first I thought maybe that's the usual thing. . . . It'll get better. . . . It'll be what they say it is . . . heaven and all that.

"But, Ken, it never was. It was always agony. He knew it. But he was selfish. He didn't care about me hurting so. . . . Oh Ken, I do still care for him but . . . I'm scared of him."

"And Jean?" asked Ken.

"That's different. Dreamy. Makes me not care. Oh, Ken, when I was a little girl, twelve years old, I had a dream, a dream about a girl just like Jean. Jean's good. She treated me the way Jean does now. Jean's kind. I'm not afraid of her. She can't hurt me. . . ." And Diana began to cry, softly, very softly.

Diana's simplicity, her confidence in Ken and her choice of him as her confessor, touched him. Yet he saw quite clearly that his sympathy for Diana was born of his own distress. For the moment, he regained perspective. What had happened to him? Was he really happy?

"Chicago is a depressing city," he told Diana. "At least, that's the way it hits me. I came here a couple of years ago with not even a clean shirt. Today I got plenty of shirts, but . . ."

"What have you got to worry about?" she asked. She dried her eyes. "As Jean says, you got the women backed off the map. You can live on your looks for another twenty years. But me . . . what have I got to look forward to?"

"Plenty, baby," he patted her cheek, "and don't think . . . drink."

The show was about to close. Chicago had not responded to Howard Vee's trenchant wit; his sophisticated melodies were, it appeared, already *passé*. Business had been poor. Mike Vee himself came to Chicago. He ordered the posting of a closing notice. He had no intention, he said, of paying losses out of profits already banked.

The news affected Ken not at all. Chicago days were dizzily whirling by. His pace was too great for Frankie. The pink-cheeked chorus boy, a boy no longer, refused to bask in the glow of Ken's greater success. Frankie had grown into a paler and wiser young man. He had stopped drinking. During his stay in Chicago, a rich old man of the West Side was befriending him. Ken saw little of him. Ken's own days and nights were full. His entourage contained new faces. His mind, jangling with new and more curious ideas, was weary of chorus boys and chatter about show business. It was a relief to spend the evening with a college boy or a young dairy farmer from Wisconsin or an electrical engineer who lived in an expensive lake shore apartment hotel.

Chicago, rousing slumbering memories, offered varied possibilities for entertainment, its ever-shifting group of parasites who clung to him, hands open, borrowing, eating free meals, drinking his liquor, soon whetted his appetite for parties and for what he succinctly termed, "laughs."

Within him a new and rich vein was being bared. While he was drinking, his mind seemed to escape the limitations of his body. He was never Kenneth Gracey. He was the lady superintendent of a girl's seminary putting her charges to bed, or a redheaded woman acrobat cursing the stage hands in a small town vaudeville theatre for not fastening the braces of her tightrope. Or Aunt Emily Winterbottom

giving lessons in etiquette. Or just the plain old-fashioned old lady who lived in a shoe, explaining in detail how the children got there.

He never knew how he came to Rocco's. Perhaps he was kidnapped. It was possible that someone had snatched him from the gin flat around the corner from the theatre, where a loose, baggy ex-chorus girl sold diluted alcohol in her parlor and her withering charms in her bedroom. Ken, lounging on a settee, chatting with a magician out of work, could not recall when he had left the shabby flat. Perhaps, he smiled to himself, the magician had been Rocco in disguise and had whisked him off to his den.

Rocco's den, by the way, was a richly furnished apartment. Ken, chattering on, exhibiting the full repertory of his characterizations, suddenly decided to ask the swarthy, square-shouldered, snappily dressed young man who he was.

"Rocco," he said. Pale cheeks. Blue beard. Heavy eyebrows.

Ken chortled: "Old Auntie Bella Rocco or I'm a loose nut. Auntie Rocco, the racketeer—or should I say—Rocco-teer."

"You're right." Rocco spoke in a sharp throaty voice. His eyes were black coals. "Let's go downstairs. It's my birthday."

"What's downstairs?"

"A party. Come on. I want you to dance."

As Ken descended narrow stairs, guided by Rocco, he recalled Joe Durazzo's words. Joe knew all about Rocco. "Ex-Capone," Joe had said. "Was. Isn't now. Edging in. Has a piece of our theatre. That's why we've had no shake-downs. The doorman is a Rocco mugg."

"Mugg?" Ken had laughed. "Muggsy-wuggsy doorman. How cute!"

But Rocco, leading the way downstairs, was anything but cute. He was imposing. Two guns, probably. Maybe three. What fun, eh kid?

Downstairs was an elongated room, designed somewhat after an enlarged bowling-alley, thought the very drunk Ken. And muggs—exquisite muggs—beautiful hard-boiled muggs.

"Hello, Percy," he hailed a heavy-jowled mugg who scowled as he passed.

"Grin, Pietro," said Rocco; and Pietro grinned.

To another, short, wizened, bald, Ken delivered a determined chuck under the chin. The little mugg snapped out of his seat. Rocco spattered orders in Italian with the rapidity of machine-gun fire, and the gnome settled back uneasily into his seat.

At the piano a square-thumbed square-hair-cut barked: "What d'ye want? The Saint Louis Blues?"

Rocco was polite. "They wait for you. After you finish, you eat if you want."

"I don't want to eat," Ken said. "But who are these boys?"

"My gang," said Rocco, with a sombre note of pride in his voice. Ken forced his drooping eyes open. Around a circular table sat Rocco's gang, fifteen delectably human morsels, as Ken said to himself. Then he looked again. Eyes focussed upon him, he looked into eyes, amused, friendly.

"Boys," said Rocco, "I got him. You watch now." He turned to the piano player. "Give him that piece from 'Sweeter Than Sweet.' "

The piano player snapped into it. He played three chor-

uses while Ken drank champagne. Then, long legs askew in a gesture of abandon, Ken danced.

As he danced, the pulse of his temples throbbed aloud; his heart pounded, his head cleared. Surging of irresistible energy flooded his body.

Rocco stood at the side of the dance floor, eyes glowing with admiration. "What a dancer!" he cried. The "boys" applauded. Ken responded to the noisy expression of approval. He repeated the dance. "I told you so—what a dance!"

The dance over, Ken wanted to rest. His breath came in short gasps. The liquor pounded against his heart. "You sit next to me," Rocco said. Ken sat. "I kill for you, maybe," said Rocco. "Please don't—until I tell you to," Ken meekly requested. A waiter asked him what he wanted.

"No food. A drink," said Ken.

"My good Scotch," suggested Rocco with keen solicitude, "House of Lords, direct from the other side," he said proudly, "right under Al's nose."

"Who's Al?" Ken asked.

"If you say so, I kill him."

"Capone?"

He nodded, eyes flooded with the glowing light of self-esteem. Then he rose.

"Boys," he said, "you drink to me, I know. That you did before. Now . . . drink to *il buomo volante* . . . my butterfly man."

XXI

IN the train, narrow in a berth, slant wise, trying to sleep, Ken was ill. It was Sunday night. Joe Durazzo hovered over him.

"It wasn't so much missing the show," he said. "Old man Vee will probably forgive you for that. But scaring us. Where was you, Ken?"

"With Rocco," Ken murmured between dry, caked lips.

"I knew Rocco's stuff," Joe continued. "But the others thought you was being kidnapped. I knew different. You ain't got enough to make it worth while snatching you."

He talked on. With a sudden start, Ken sat up.

"I got the heebie-jeebies," he said. His face was pale, a thin white fist on his cheeks. "I got the jitters. I gotta have a drink." Joe poured a thimble full of rye in a collapsible silver cup.

"I'll be all right in the morning," Ken spoke reassuringly. "I've been crazy to drink so much. I mixed drinks too. And acted pretty awful."

"You're funny," Joe remarked. "I see lots of wild babies but you take the cake."

The train hurrying through the night toward New York lulled Ken into drowsiness. Joe switched off the light and climbed into the adjoining berth. He was soon sleeping.

Little things counted for much in the morning. The jerky gait of the night before was gone. With it had vanished that curious sensation of an opaque world, fight-

ing through streets heavily compressed, the atmosphere weighing down stickily, making each step difficult, like a diver plodding deep upon the bottom of the sea.

In the morning, cloud shapes, queer faces in towering white cumulus, whisk of telegraph poles passing the train, thin emptiness at the pit of his stomach. Coffee, sleep, warm sun beating through the window panes and Ken felt energy returning to his body.

Joe sat beside him.

"Better this morning?" he asked. Ken nodded.

"What happened to the others?" Ken asked.

"They took the Saturday night train to town. You barged into the theatre at ten o'clock that night. You was a sight. Dirty. Clothes torn. What did Rocco do to you?"

"I don't remember," Ken said.

"Lucky you got out alive. I heard he kills 'em afterwards."

Ken laughed. "That's fantastic," he said. Then added: "But so is everything."

Not without trepidation did Ken say, "There's Howard." He saw him in the crowd lining the train exit.

"Why didn't you tell me he was back?" he asked Joe.

"I didn't know."

"Beat it," Ken ordered. "Take your bags and this one of mine to the Gladwell. I'll meet you there."

Howard was pushing his way through the crowd to meet him. He was smiling. He reached Ken's side, grasped his hand, said something about Ken's health and was chatting in short broken excited phrases as he held Ken's arm and guided him to the taxicab gate.

"I landed Friday. Heard you were ill. Had father on the

phone in Chicago. He was roaring about your being drunk, but I knew otherwise."

Ken thought he looked the same. Leaner, perhaps.

"I never did hear from you. Knew you weren't a writer. But you could have kept me informed."

Then he didn't know, Ken concluded. He had talked to no one, heard none of the gossip . . . or the truth. The chatter continued. Howard directed the taxi to the Barrington. Almost without Ken's realizing that he was again in New York, that Howard had returned from Europe, that the road tour had ended, he found himself sitting beside Howard, hearing his voice, exactly as if he had not fled from him months before.

New York, as the cab slowly opened a path in the traffic, was rising high above him, narrow streets, the creaking Third Avenue "L" distantly dull now in the clouded noon light, as they turned east away from Park Avenue. A right turn and the cab came to a stop. Ken, still silent, still hearing Howard's enthusiastic recital of events past, London nights, incidents, anecdotes pouring into his ears, stepped out of the cab. A negro ran to meet him.

"Mr. Gracey, sir, a pleasure to see you." It was Rutgers. The ornate facade of the building before which he stood was that of the Barrington.

"Welcome home, Mr. Gracey," Rutgers beamed. "Welcome home."

"I can't stay here, Howard," Ken said. "I don't want to."

"But you must have a reason."

"I'm tired out. I want to be by myself." Ken's voice rasped. He was impatient. He wondered how sincere he

really was, whether all the preliminary fencing had not been the false parrying of friends who do not wish to harm each other. Of course, the passion was gone out of romance. That was it. What he really wanted was freedom to act as he pleased. He no longer cared whether he harmed Howard. Nor himself.

"I shan't be here much," Howard explained, "and you can sleep all day. And there's no one like Rutgers."

Ken did not answer. Howard was sitting on the piano bench. Ken found a chewing gum capsule in his pocket and slipped it into his mouth.

"It looks so American seeing you chew," Howard said, "after all those months on the other side. You really should go to England. It would lift you immeasurably."

"I wish I could go away," Ken aimlessly suggested. "An automobile trip, perhaps. No destination. Just a trip."

"Take Rutgers," Howard said. "He'll chauffeur you. And be your nursemaid."

Ken's old gay smile flashed briefly.

"Where's the Mercedes?" Howard asked.

"I stored it when I passed through here on my way from Boston to Atlantic City last fall."

"I'll have Rutgers get it in shape. Take him with you and come back when you please. Or at least in time for the new show. I'll have your room ready for you then and you'll once more be in a mood for fun. What do you say?"

"The idea is marvelous. Just what I need. But I'd rather go alone. A chauffeur isn't necessary. In fact, I get a thrill out of driving. And I don't want to live here in the Barrington."

"I suppose you don't care for the mood of my lovely

apartment. It isn't soothing enough. All right—I'll find a better place for us to live."

It was amusing to be packed high with bags, saying good-byes to Leon Shaw, to Howard and to the solicitous Rutgers. He had no plans—no destination. He was definitely not in flight. He wasn't running away. He was merely finding himself. Establishing himself. Cutting ties. Breaking chains.

He had told Howard about the room Joe had engaged at the Gladwell.

"Let him sleep there," Howard had said. Ken had finally jeered at Howard: "You make me feel like a bashful bride."

Howard, however, was in earnest. He had so much to say. They could sit up all night talking. And go riding in the park, early the next morning.

The next morning, after a night at the Barrington, Ken decided to leave town at once.

He was, at last, free. No superior person was guiding him about the maze-like city, teaching him ethics, etiquette, and where to eat expensively. Free—yet obliged to leave New York. For the first time, free in New York, money in the bank, money in his pocket, more to be had in advance from Leon Shaw. New York, wonderful, magical New York, city of infinite variety. Yet he must go away—for a time, at least. The car plunged into a crowded street. Its long tonneau, its European style, shinily bright, attracted all eyes. A smile from a fat girl on the corner, a half-concealed glance from a boy at the curb. Ken stared at the boy; suddenly his lips relaxed into a grin. He saw the long face, the searching eyes of Jules Monroe.

"Julie!" Ken cried.

"Hello," Monroe returned. Then his mouth opened wide in astonishment. "Ken Gracey—how are you?"

"Where are you going?"

"The 23 Club on West Fifty-second. My car is around the corner or I'd hop in with you."

"I'll meet you there." Ken's spirits rose. He stepped on the accelerator and the powerful motor thrust him forward into Fifth Avenue.

The 23 Club, haunt of the more elegant spenders, was intolerant of poverty. Behind its mahogany bar, a mirror was studded with bank notes of many nations and every denomination. Exactly centered was a thousand dollar bill, a gold certificate, crisp, clean, unspent.

Jules Monroe joined Ken at the corner table facing the entrance. It was mid-afternoon and the Club was filling with men and women of the city; the recognizable faces of well-known actors, authors, bankers, business men.

The boy, neatly dressed, dark curling hair above soft brown eyes, stood beside the dance director.

"Sit down," Jules said. The boy gingerly sat on the edge of the wall bench. Jules faced Ken.

"How are you?" he purred.

A cat—blinking yellow eyes; a lynx, yellow-eyed in a cavern.

"Meet my friend Jackie," he said. Then smiled: "This is Buddy. Jackie. By the way, are rumors true? I hear you are now known as the Flame."

"Lovely name." Ken inclined his head. "Charming idea, but it isn't my title yet."

"I think Rosebud is dear. How does it hit you?" Jules mocked. "I can easily popularize it if it suits."

"In Chicago, a swell guy called me the Butterfly Man."

"Too precious, dear, too precious. The Flame for you."

"Not today—I'm burning low, nearly gutted, you might say. And no Rosebud—that is, until I wear a rose in my—hair."

"You *have* changed for the better. What say to a tasty tid-bit to whet the appetite? Jackie tells me he has a little pal, Gregory Whoosit or what have you. What is his name, Jackie?"

"Gregory Jones," said the boy.

"Gregory Jones—and he wants to get into show business. Now I think, Buddy, we ought to call Gregory and then we'll all go over to my flat where you can show him how a great dancer dances; and I'll teach Jackie the technique of being a chorus boy. Elegant idea, don't you think?"

"Elegant," said Ken.

"Leave it to old devil Monroe to think of elegant ideas." He looked squarely into Ken's eyes. "Like me now?"

"Julie, you are—the last word—the last, last word in what I needed to kick off the blues. Come, let's get started."

"You were very drunk when you drove over the bridge," Grant Beckett said. He was smoking a pipe and the deep orange of the log flames flickered against his nose glasses. Very British looking, Ken thought. His rounded head, now somewhat bald, was symmetrically framed in silhouette by a window. Beyond, in the dusk, was the late spring evening of Cape Cod, sombre, chill, a study in tones of gray.

"You're not too warm, are you, Gracey?" he asked. "I'm a comfortable sort myself."

"And frank?" Ken asked.

"Yes. Why not?"

"I've heard of you, of course," Ken explained. "I've always been happening upon fellows who studied drama with you or who played up here in the summertime."

"Yes—I'm getting ready for our opening performance, five weeks away. Three fellows are here with me now. Bill Paige, who paints my scenery, saw you careening over the bridge and switched on the flood lights over the barn. That saved your life."

"Damned nice of him," Ken said. "I wonder if my life is worth saving."

"Another of my boys, Dud Sweetzer, saw you dance two seasons ago, in New York. He tells me you're a natural dancer, wasted in musical comedy. He thinks you ought to be developed. Is that the reason why you are unhappy, because you are disappointed in your ambitions?"

"No—not at all."

"You see—you were really horribly drunk the other day. You instinctively plugged down on the brakes or you would have gone on into Norse Inlet, and the mud would have got you."

"I wasn't trying to commit suicide," said Ken. "I had been drunk for about a week. I recall vaguely that someone said you were the wise man of Norse Inlet, that your boys worshipped you and that you knew all the answers. I drove up here, nipping all the way. I didn't really know where I was until a filling station man said, 'That road goes to Norse Inlet.' 'Isn't that where Grant Beckett carries on?' I asked. He said, 'Yes, the old guy is sorta queer.'

'So'm I,' I said. The man laughed and I saw red. I could have punched his face. Instead I drank half a pint of whiskey all at once—and you rescued me."

"Glad to have you," Beckett said.

"I really wanted to meet you," Ken continued. "Although not in this special way. And your boys—I've heard you have a marvelous bunch."

Beckett smiled, then tightened his grip upon his pipe. "My lads are a trifle Tennysonian. As the poet says:

"And here is truth; but an' it please thee not
Take thou the truth as thou has told it me.
For truly, as thou sayest, a fairy king
And fairy queen have built the city, son."

Ken laughed. Beckett chuckled. "My boys," he said, "are all light and fluff. Actors, or would be. Languid otherwise. I stir them up. You see, son, I am not old, yet old enough to be weary of a commercial theatre. Here I am king. I produce what I please to produce. The world comes to my doorstep. I make very little money and spend less. No more quarrels with producers nor with the guardians of public morals."

"I understand now."

"And I can understand you," Beckett said. "What are you trying to forget? Or should I have said 'whom'?"

"You are a curious blend of the pure physical specimen and of the self-analytical introvert," Beckett said. "Two individuals in one. It took us three days to sober you up to the point where you could talk sense to me. I suggest that you stop being a coward. Stop damning yourself for fancied sins. Stop drinking. Stop running away from your-

self. Go back to New York and follow your own inclinations. Drink when you feel like it, never for hatred of yourself.

"I passed through a phase of my development which corresponded to yours. I was older than you—twenty-eight, I think. And successful. A somebody. The other was twenty-one, sleek, mysterious. I was always as you see me, fattish, old-womanish. Occasionally a shrew. He played golf, I played golf. He rowed, I rowed. He drank gin and bitters and I ruined my stomach drinking gin and bitters.

"We carried on until one day I was invited to the Duchess of Toodledeeoo's for a week-end. The Duchess was sixty and powerful. Had a lover once in a show, and she could be brow-beaten into backing ventures—privately, of course.

"Well—I was invited to bring a guest with me. The Duchess would have preferred a divinely tall, robust young Adonis. Walter was hollow-chested, sallow and gigoloish. The Duchess discovered, however, that he held no respect for age, titles of nobility or sex. I'm sure that he would have been made a baronet on the next honor's list, except that the Duchess said to me: 'Beckett,' she said in a deep voice, 'your friend is myopic. I'm sure he mistook me for a scullery maid. And I am short-winded.' Then she winked.

"I cracked young Walter in the face late that night. He admitted he had been bleeding me, that was all. Two weeks later he married the widow of Sir Trevalyan Botts, the tobacco merchant."

Beckett filled his pipe. "Your friend is wealthy, a genius, as you say. You can give him nothing. Already he has taught you despair. Buck up, son. Go your own way. Forget him."

XXII

WHEN Ken returned to New York, he visited Leon Shaw's ornate office in the Yerkes Building. The pudgy agent squinted at him and asked him to close the door.

"It's about time you came in to see me," he complained. "Don't you want to go back to work?"

"As a matter of necessity only," Ken said. "I'm nearly broke."

Leon rubbed his nose with his forefinger.

"Howard Vee asked me to make up a contract for you several weeks ago."

"I won't take it," Ken said firmly.

Leon was startled. "Why not?" he demanded. "Weren't you happy in 'Sweeter Than Sweet'?"

"Too happy. . . ."

"I can't get you seven fifty any other place."

"I won't take it," Ken persisted.

The agent's desk 'phone buzzed. He listened. "Show him in," he said. He faced Ken and grinned broadly.

"We'll see," he grunted. "We'll see." Then he looked up, past Ken's shoulder. The door was being opened. "I sent for Howard right after you called me this morning. He told me to watch out for you."

Ken heard steps. Howard stood beside him. Flickering bitterness was revealed in the arch of Howard's lips as he placed a hand on Ken's shoulder.

"You didn't write," Howard said. "I decided you would

look up Leon, if and when you returned. Why did you vanish?"

"I needed a rest. And I don't write."

"You'll write your name on this," Leon winked at Howard as he produced a contract from his desk drawer.

"I suppose I will," Ken said.

The rebellion was broken. His will to fight was gone. He dipped his pen in ink. He signed his name.

"Satisfied?" he said to Howard.

"I'm glad," the other replied. "Did you read it?"

"No." Ken glanced at the contract. "It's a regular form, isn't it?"

"Ironclad. You work for me or for no one . . . until next June, eleven months away."

Because he needed money, Ken agreed, he had bound himself to Howard for another season. This reason he had made clear as they walked up Broadway. "I still feel I should work for someone else," he explained.

"You're super-sensitive," Howard said. "I'm tying you up only because I have a part for you in the new show." He was serious; the lines of his mouth straight. "Been drinking?" he asked Ken.

"Not for a week."

"Then I shan't ask you over to the hotel for a cocktail. I'm not even going to invite you to live at the Barrington again. Because I don't really care, if you want to know the truth."

Ken did not speak. His lips were tightly shut.

"You were with Grant Beckett," Howard accused.

"Who told you?"

"I knew a week ago."

"I was. And had a wonderful time."

"Splendid," said Howard. He stopped abruptly. Ken glanced at him. Howard was visibly exasperated. The tense nervous quality of his mood was apparent.

"I'll have Leon call you when rehearsals start. Until then . . ." His voice trailed away. He turned swiftly and disappeared into the hurrying noonday crowds.

Ken felt the sharp twinge of pain as Howard quit him, there at the corner of Forty-second Street and Broadway. For many minutes, he stood alone in the crowded street. Faces, faces of strangers, tense faces, strained faces . . . then as the noon hour lengthened, the smiling expectant faces of lunch-going workers, eager for their midday freedom. Simple, very simple people.

He was not, could not be one of them. He stood apart. The past was dead. Howard, bitter, was estranged. He, who needed so desperately the guidance of a friend, had none. Slowly the significance of the disjointed scene in the agent's office became clear. He had been nervous, over-eager; he had needed a drink. Sobriety had defeated him. Drunk he would not have signed the contract; he would have forced Leon to seek another engagement for him.

On Forty-third Street, a narrow doorway led to a hidden barroom, concealed between a taxi stand and a fruit-erer's. He recalled the place. It was around the corner. He decided to suspend his will, to take a drink.

That afternoon, Ken succeeded in finding Jean Pond. The chorus girl was living across the Queensborough Bridge in Astoria. She hurried to New York at his urgent request. Over diluted old-fashioned cocktails they chatted,

bemoaning the passing of good old days, tearing apart memories, slowly, roundly developing a deep mellow mood.

At six o'clock, the bartender refused to serve them with any more liquor.

"We can't afford to have you fall down in the street," he said. "The cops'll be closing us tight if you do."

They trod a spiral path on a heaving floor to the sidewalk. Jean, her face harder than ever, her eyes cold points of steel, held Ken erect.

"I'll get you a room at the Sandringham," she said. "I know the clerk."

A taxi took them to the tall theatrical hotel on Forty-eighth Street. Fresh air had steadied Ken. He wrote his name on the register, paid a week's rent in advance.

His room was pleasant enough. Jean, rapidly becoming sober, loosened Ken's clothing.

"I gotta go home to cook supper for Diana," she told him. "Poor girl . . . she's utterly helpless without me."

"What does Zigzag think of her?" Ken asked.

"He's jealous of course . . . but it won't be for long. Di, too, has winning ways."

Soon Ken was alone. The room ceased whirling. Walls, close to each other, held him like a vise. The window was open. He went to it, breathed air. Sandringham, Sandringham . . . where he lived . . . alone. A fly buzzed about his head. He swung a palm, trapped it, squeezed it dead. It clung, moist, to his hand.

He washed off the blood in the bathroom basin. His hair tossed senselessly about his head, his eyes were shot with pink; he needed a shave.

Suddenly a sound rose within him.

"To hell with everything!" he bellowed. "I'm crazy as a

fool! Crazy! Mad . . . a crazy fool of a . . ." His voice died. His lips were contorted. He saw them twitch in his mirrored reflection. Then he forced himself to smile.

"Am I . . . ?" he demanded, "am I going to have fun? I'll say I am," he answered. With a sweeping movement of arms and legs his clothes were ripped off. The body he had always had, the fine graceful body, was still his. And he could still dance.

Into the bedroom, he danced wildly, an animalistic vulpine encircling, a sheer pagan savagery in his leaping, careening charge. Ken danced. Chairs tumbled over as he struck them; he swept the table clear of lamp, books; the telephone jangled. He danced, naked. Then exhausted, happy, he fell to the floor.

Howard called it "The King's Own." It was a replica of his London success. Its stars, the Farraguts, had been imported from England. Ken appeared at rehearsal following Leon Shaw's command. He discovered that others of the troupe had rehearsed for ten days.

During the eight weeks since he had signed the contract with Howard, Ken had lived at the Sandringham. He had avoided Broadway and its night clubs. Through Jean, he had met innumerable little people of the chorus. Harry Cobden, who had been in the original "Sweeter than Sweet" company, frequently joined Jean and Ken. Through Harry, chorus man for twenty years, Ken met Daisy Hartzell and Widgie Waters, two chorus girls who lived uptown near Central Park West. Daisy and Widgie occupied two apartments in an old fashioned red brick flat. Their doors were forever unlatched. Boys and girls came and went. Gin, weak, diluted alkie, was plentiful. It drenched

minds, created a slightly dizzy haze, high-pitched laughter, chatter about the unceasingly interesting topic, sex.

Here Ken spent many days, days which drifted past inexpensively, satisfactorily. Joe Durazzo found him one night. Joe began to take care of him once more. Then, too, Frankie arrived. His Chicago patron had dropped dead without taking the trouble to change a certain clause in his will. As a result, Frankie was broke again.

Ken had urged both Joe and Frankie to ask Howard Vee for chorus work in "The King's Own." They had attended a preliminary chorus call. Bucky Barton was staging the routines for the new revue. He rejected them . . . at Howard's instructions, Ken guessed.

"The old fluff thinks he is manly," Frankie complained. "Don't I know he played the dressmaker in 'Evleen' on the road?"

Ken guessed that "The King's Own" was being produced in a manner different from "Sweeter than Sweet." His suspicions were confirmed as soon as he reported for rehearsals at the Alcazar Theatre. The new chorus numbered sixty-four. The cast was top-heavy with famous musical comedy and variety names of the London stage. Ken was one of the few Americans listed on the call board.

Howard was not in the theatre when Ken arrived. Quite by chance, Ken collided headlong with him as he descended stairs to his temporary dressing-room below stage.

"Hello, Gracey," Howard said curtly.

Ken laughed.

"Hello, you old sinner," he greeted him.

Howard grinned. "You look wonderful. Have dinner with me tonight?"

"Why not?" Ken replied.

The Farraguts, husband and wife, ruled "The King's Own." They drank tea at four and otherwise attempted to impress the world with their complete independence of American musical comedy tradition. Because Jack and Alice Farragut were indispensable to the success of the show, Howard permitted them to dictate to him. As a result many sketches had been withdrawn, several numbers rewritten to the taste of the stars.

Bucky Barton, too, was quite different from Jules Monroe. Bucky wanted dancers, not playmates, men, not boy friends.

Because he was thus at the mercy of his stars and his temperamental dance director, Howard was, he explained, unable to keep his promise to Ken, who had no speaking lines and whose two dances would be individual specialties, not parts of big chorus numbers. This, Ken learned as they sat in their old rendezvous, L'Aiglon, dining, tasting choice French wines.

"I want you to release me," Ken said.

"I can't do that," Howard replied.

"Why not?"

"I propose to keep you under my management indefinitely."

"But I shan't work for you."

"Indefinitely? Of course not. But for a time."

"Can't you see that my being in the show is an absurdity? You admit yourself that you have nothing for me to do. From a professional point of view I can't afford to waste a season on Broadway doing two dance numbers a night."

"You'll make plenty of money."

"I don't want to work in the show."

Howard's most engaging manner was on display. "Ken," he said, "frankly you are here because you have believed in me. I'm a novice no longer. I've had two conspicuous successes. I'm not looking toward this season. I'm pointing westward, as you might say, to the horizon. A distant goal. And so you. You'll be a star."

This talk, Ken thought, was not to the point. Why must he fence? Why parry? Why not coldly admit the truth that his interest was no longer professional or even personal. More like the macabre ghoulish efforts of a vivisectionist, cutting into, probing into a dog's corpse. Hadn't he made it plain? The affair was through. True enough, he himself had avoided an open break. For, after all, Howard Vee was not a perverted monomaniac. He was not of the sort who whips himself into a frenzy or drinks himself to an orgiastic state of rare exaltation. Howard was—Ken told himself—his victim. Howard had been his prey. Yet how speak of the unspeakable? What could he say?

As these thoughts troubled Ken, Howard eloquently pleaded his case. He concluded with a simple statement:

"If you are worried because of me, forget it. I shall be too busy to think . . . of those things."

Autumn tinged New York with magic blue, high skies, into which the skyscrapers towered. In the Alcazar Theatre Howard Vee toiled, struggled with his company. Alert mornings, tedious afternoons, weary evenings, broken by difficult production problems, passed in slow succession. Occasionally the Farraguts added to his burden. They were difficult to satisfy. They seemed to consider this American engagement as an interlude of condescension. Arrogant

toward their fellows of the cast, they cut the atmosphere of rehearsals with acid. They were roundly hated.

Ken, when he began preparations for his two dance numbers, decided he would again attempt to forego the joys of intoxication, the sweet release of the orgy. He would be strictly professional, he determined. He would meet Howard face to face, regard him as a director, a producer. Thus straightforward in his admission that their friendship was ended, he would settle into a period of money-making.

For a few days he succeeded in maintaining the illusion that he was an obscure, harmless and uninteresting dancer. He remained in the background, hung in the shadows of the big stage or sulked in his dressing-room. A piano player supplied him with music for his new routines. He engaged Jimmy Pierce, negro dancer, to watch his work and to suggest innovations.

During the third week of rehearsals, the stage manager, Murray King, laconic old timer, with the sad face of an Assyrian slave, told him his first act specialty was to be curtailed and made an incident of a chorus number.

"By whose orders?" Ken demanded.

"Mr. Vee's."

Ken pushed the stage manager aside as he dashed out of the dressing-room. He found Howard seated on the stage apron, guiding the Farraguts through a sketch. Howard was intent upon his stars. He did not notice Ken, who paced angrily up the stage. As Ken turned downstage, Jack Farragut interrupted the rehearsal. Tall, blond, sharp-featured, with a drawl craftily concealing the sting of his tongue, he said:

"I'm not accustomed, Mr. Vee, to being disturbed by dancers."

Ken heard the remark plainly. He stopped, glared at Jack, then wheeled about and strode into the wings. In a moment Howard was by his side.

"I'm through," Ken told him.

"He's a Cockney fish peddler putting on airs," Howard said. "Smack him one, after the show opens."

"I'm through," Ken repeated. Howard grasped his arm. He pushed Ken into a dressing-room and closed the door.

"I mean it," Ken said. "I just learned I'm to do one specialty and two choruses of a finale."

"That's not true," Howard retorted. "We're putting the first act dance into the ice-breaker. You can do a reprise later."

"Whose idea was it?" Ken demanded.

"The Farraguts."

"What's the use?" Ken said. "I didn't want to work in this show. You tricked me into signing—"

"I did not," Howard interrupted. "You signed voluntarily."

"You came to Leon's that day—"

"Because I heard you'd gone mad."

Ken was cold with anger.

"You heard what . . . ?"

"Ken," Howard said. "I still care more for you than for anyone in the world. I understand you, too. Crystal clear you are. Glass. And like glass, brittle, easily broken."

"Nice words."

"True words. You are here because I don't want you to ruin yourself."

Face to face with this truth, Ken winced. It was easy

enough to lose one's self in liquor, to perform astonishing feats of self-degradation, but in cold sober factual day, to know the truth was like meeting blundering bitterness, akin to despair.

"I'm making the Farraguts wait. I'm humiliating them."

"And yourself . . ."

"No. Nothing is truer than my wish that you should be happy—"

"Nice words," Ken mocked.

"Madman," gently chided Howard, "let me keep you sane."

To combine two moods in a perfect blend was Ken's avowed purpose. He would convert the subtle, sly, scheming Ken Gracey, whom Howard knew and dominated, into the searing, flaming Buddy Renault of Tia Juana and all points east. He would disgrace himself before Howard, get drunk, flaunt his vicious second self, destroy thus with one blow the illusion which Howard selfishly cherished. When this scene would first be played Ken did not know. He prayed that his opportunity would soon be at hand. Already his friends of the other world, the adoring Joe, malicious Frankie, diabolical Jules, were wagging busy tongues. To others, especially those in the road company of "Sweeter than Sweet," many obscure happenings must now seem clear. Howard, brilliant Howard, had been a slave to the dazzling Ken Gracey, they would repeat. Gossip would seep toward Broadway, into restaurants and night clubs, into the *coulisses* of theatres and the alleys where the unemployed idly exchanged scandalous news.

Howard, Ken believed, would be made the butt of ridicule. Sensitive Howard, kind Howard, whom he had really

loved, would lose caste, friends would desert him, he would forfeit his splendid independence of mind, lose his self-esteem, become in a word, a failure—because of Ken.

The Farraguts had rented a house in the suburb of Great Neck. It was called the Parsonage because Parson Chester had lived there on the knoll above the sound for the seventy-eight years from 1790 to 1868. Completely remodelled and rebuilt, the Parsonage was now a show place, a country home for the wealthy, rented at a high price to transients of the theatrical profession.

"You'll have to come," Howard told Ken. "I've set the opening for Saturday night. They'll have busses to convey the cast down for a week-end after the show. I hear the grounds are studded with bungalows and that it'll be a rich blow-out. Jackie and Alicia will pose as Duke and Duchess of the royal blood and we'll all get a little tight."

"Of course," Ken had said, "you'll be there."

Howard nodded. "I'll go."

In the hurly burly of dress rehearsals and the tensity of the opening night, the party at the Parsonage was almost forgotten. To Ken, who avoided contacts, who had made no friends with others of the cast, it promised nothing more than a boring interlude, an inescapable duty. The Farraguts might amuse him with their tedious self-importance. And Howard would be there.

Perhaps because the show was not definitely a great success when the curtain descended on the first night's performance, the mood of those who travelled to the Parsonage after midnight was varied. Skeptical members of the troupe, English actors who had crossed the ocean in the expectation that they would duplicate the show's Lon-

don triumph, were frankly disturbed. They were silent, moody. In the bus which bore them to Long Island, they chatted quietly.

No sooner had the automatic door of the vehicle been closed upon him than Ken realized that his easy acceptance of the invitation was a mistake. He too had labored under a strain. He now needed a drink; to be free, to dance, to mimic, to cast aside the ugly drabness of his emotions for the varicolored hues of "The Other World." Almost as if an alchemic transmutation was occurring within him, he felt the desire rise. He looked about him. For the first time he became aware of another man, palely blond, slim, narrow shoulders, even blue eyes, nose pertinently direct . . . typically an Englishman. Bowler was his name, Harvey Bowler, straight man for Alicia Farragut in a side-splitting sketch in which she had appeared in a London Music Hall.

No word had been passed between Ken and Harvey Bowler. The Englishman had ignored the very existence of the quiet dancer, whose single specialty in the second act was his only solo appearance, who danced beautifully, yet somehow without suggesting the joy of dancing. Ken, now glancing about the interior of the bus, avoiding the eyes of Fanny Hale, the soubrette; glancing contemptuously at fat Lennox Cowle, the gray-haired kewpie, saw Bowler anew. His soft tongue, the flow of his words suggested an interesting personality. Ken rose; better to confront him.

Bowler rode facing the rear of the bus. He was chattering in magpie fashion, quick short phrases. Ken heard him ridicule the American custom of permitting late comers to be seated before the end of the first act. Prosaic subject, shopworn excuse for failure, thought Ken. Then Bowler's

eyes fell upon Ken's. The man was harassed, lonely. His eyes were those of a fugitive. Ken saw in them what Bowler apparently saw in his, for the Englishman smiled and said,

"Make room for 'Er Grace the Marchioness of Gracey and see you keep your train in your 'ands as you does so."

Ken's face, sombre until now, broke into a smile.

"Meaning what?" he asked.

"Aren't you being presented to the Queen?" Bowler winked.

Ken understood.

They were assigned to the same bungalow.

"In London we'd use this for a w. c.," Bowler said, "although the house is rather countryside. I've stood the Farraguts for years. They're awful. They pay me each week or I'd jolly well murder them with arsenic in their porridge."

The house was nice enough. An American house, now refurbished with every conceivable English accent. As the bus arrived, Alicia, "Lady—if possible—Alice" as Bowler called her, took up a position at the head of the old Colonial stairs. Her curiously foreshortened face, so amusing on the stage, attempted haughtiness and failed. Jack Farragut, in swallowtail and ice cold manner, had greeted his guests at the door.

"We'll have Bass's ale or cambric tea. I brought me own Irish," said Bowler.

"Irish?" Ken echoed.

"Dublin whiskey. Raw enough for a rare bit of Bowler, eh?" He produced the bottle. They were in the frame one-story house, two wide, pleasant bedrooms, separated by a center corridor.

"Reminds me of a Liverpool crib 'house,'" said Bowler, lapsing into stage Cockney. "A bit of a 'eat on and we'd cook each other."

They drank. Suddenly Ken recalled that Howard would be present by now. "We ought to go to the Parsonage," he said.

"I know . . . Vee will be there."

Ken, shocked, said: "Of course."

"Of course, Auntie Eulalie," Bowler mocked, "he's cheating."

"Meaning what?"

"I'm in the know. Did you ever hear of Chick De Vaughn?"

"No."

"Chorus boy. He'll be here, tootsie."

Ken drank.

The party was not a frost. Even the Farraguts unbent. Charades at first. Followed by champagne. And a very tall gentleman—"Ambassador from the Court of St. James' to the President of the United States," someone said.

Ken was drunk. He teetered visibly. He saw Howard. Howard was alone, standing in a corner of the chaste library, a wide wine glass in his hand. He put the wine aside as Ken entered.

"Where were you at curtain time?"

"On stage."

"I was delayed," Howard said.

Ken caught his hand. "If I knew my own mind I would say this," he spoke with enormous seriousness. "Howard, I shall quit the show on Monday. You don't need me. You won't miss me."

"That isn't true," Howard said. "Come with me."

At the end of the room was a door. It opened into the garden. The night, late October, was chill. Ken, warmed within by the liquor, shivered.

"They've put me in the Parsonage, of course," Howard said. "Where are you?"

"With an English vixen, Bowler."

"Vixen?"

"Don't you know?"

"Hired him because of Jack and Alicia."

"Who hired Chick De Vaughn?"

"I don't know. Who is he?"

"I don't know who he is—or care."

They were at the door of the bungalow. Ken stopped and faced Howard.

"Don't come in," he said. "I'm mad. I'm crazy."

"Ken," Howard said, "the curtain went up tonight. The show's on. Let's play it for all it's worth."

"I'm drunk," Ken said. "You mustn't be with me now."

"I'm talking about us."

"There is no us."

"Is it because Jack invited that chorus boy? You don't think . . . ?"

"I understand perfectly why he is here. You brought him, not Jack Farragut. In the back of your head you were, being cute. You wanted to out-fox me. Make me feel contrite. Can't you see, Howard?" he cried. "Can't you understand? I'm the devil . . . your devil."

"My very personal devil, then."

"No—your enemy—your enemy."

Without knowing why or how he did it, Ken managed to slam the bungalow door in Howard's face.

In the bedroom was the half empty bottle of Irish whiskey. Ken drank.

In Bowler's bag were lacey underthings. "My passion," said the drunken Englishman. "Primitive, you might say."

"Lemme put 'em on," said Ken.

"Right you are."

He strewed women's silken hose, scant transparencies, on the bed. Ken stripped.

The gentle silk, soothing, caressed him. He was slim, elegantly slim.

"They fit," said Bowler. "Say, those black stockings remind me of the pictures in a book of Pierre Louys's."

"Why?"

"A pair of silk stockings enhances the thrill, Louys says. Look, you could have had me in the Opera, on the Strand, in the taxicab. I'm the same one. Elegant idea, wot?"

"Elegant." Ken thrilled to the feel of the scant garments. "I'm elegant."

With a pirouette, a kick and a leap, he was at the door. He opened it and as if pursued by the wind, raced across the lawn to the Parsonage. He leaped up the narrow steps, the dripping mist moistening the silk, which clung to him as a sheath. The door was open, Farragut's back to him. Alicia was smiling. Howard was shaking hands with a tall distinguished looking man who was saying:

"I must go to bed before dawn or—"

The ridiculously clad youth, whose wild eyes betrayed his intoxicated state, saw and heard none of this. His first glance fell upon a dark-haired boy, very young, very fresh, the clear white of unsullied adolescence in his eyes. Forgetting his raiment, recoiling momentarily from the

shock of confronting so many people, thus clad, Ken hesitated.

"It's because I—" he began. Then, jerkily twisting his head, he spoke to the boy:

"You're Chick De Vaughn, aren't you?" he demanded.

The boy was frightened. He turned to Alicia.

"N—n—no—no," he stuttered. "I'm Bobbie Farragut . . . Father," he turned to Jack.

"Get this fag out of here," Farragut said to Howard.

"Come, Ken," Howard said evenly.

Ken wakened. Legs in black silk, strip of flesh, pale pink, lace, the flimsy covering of soft bodies. . . . He nearly collapsed.

Howard (or did he dream it?), had quarrelled with Bowler. Blows had been exchanged. Ken, unconscious, lay on the bed. When he awoke, late afternoon, he ached. The green quilt covered his body. Beneath he was still in silk.

Bowler was gone. He was alone. He rose from the bed, painful limbs, dull mind. The stupor was slow to disappear. As if held powerless by a drug, he slumped into a chair. Night fell. In utter horror, he watched the minutes pass, checked one by one on the calendar clock. Seven o'clock. Eight.

His mouth was parched. On the dresser was a bottle, another bottle of Irish.

He drank.

It was nearly midnight when he reached Great Neck. He had trudged four miles, four eternal miles, trees hovering crazily overhead, shadows threatening, sky dull as his mind.

A taxicab stood at the curb.

"Take me to town," Ken ordered.

"Got enough dough?" asked the driver.

"Look," said Ken, pulling some bills from his pocket.

"K. O. supreme," the man replied.

"Supreme what?"

"Supreme tank," tossed the driver at Ken with a shake of his head. "It's in the papers."

"What's in the papers?"

"Lookie here." He pulled a Tabloid newspaper from beneath him. He thumbed the pages until he found a streamer headline set in fat black type.

"ENGLAND OUTRAGED," he read.

"So what?" Ken asked.

"They got your picture in here. Says you attacked the English Ambassador and that producer fellow, Howard Vee, saved you from a beating. I'm cute, I am," he added. "I knew you soon as I saw you."

He read the story with unbelieving eyes. Simple insinuations revealed the deepest secrets of his heart. No clear picture. Just an attack by Kenneth Gracey upon someone. Scandal. Juicy scandal. A rich morsel for a starving populace. A rich morsel of muck.

He tossed the newspaper into the gutter.

"Get going," he ordered.

"I'm your man," said the driver. "Where to?"

"Hell," Ken snapped.

"No trouble at all," the other sallied.

"Better that way," Ken said.

"What way?"

"When you're no trouble at all."

The cab snorted and went its way. Bumping over railroad tracks to a main road. A turn—beyond, New York.

He must not, he knew, return to New York. New York, magnificent New York, was forbidden soil. He must not return, must not sober up, must not be able to go to the theatre tomorrow night.

He must never see Howard again. He must never weakly betray his good fine friend. He must quit the show, quit New York.

Little Neck . . . Flushing, quiet in the hush of Sunday night. He must not be able to dance again for Howard Vee.

"Driver," he called, "close the window. It's chilly."

"I know it is," said the man as he snapped shut the pane of glass that separated him from his passenger.

Ken smiled. Easy now, easy to escape. His leg, his good right leg, shot up at an odd angle from its pivoting joint. The toe snapped against the glass, the foot crashed through, the jagged edge penetrated firm flesh of his shank, flesh of his leg, flesh upon which he danced.

It pained a little. Blood was warm. He wouldn't dance for a time. Pain increased. A pulsating throb. Warm blood. He was cold. He fainted.

XXIII

THEN it was all over, all, all over. No passion about it. Coolness. Sheets. Deep shadow and a flat colorless taste. Then knives. Pain. Now, pain gone, winter gone, slim spire of the Methodist church rising above the Camino. And it is spring.

No sound. Stark, clean quiet. Pain gone. Heart quiet. Clear thoughts.

I am me, Ken reminded himself. On the dressing table a cool, tall glass of orange juice, sweet to the mouth. He sipped, ice between his teeth; and smiled.

The bed still fresh. His own bed, white enameled, brass knobs. Shorter than he had thought. The dresser gone. A new table, wheeled close to the bed.

Comfort. That was it. And release. No passion. No desires. Time passing noiselessly. Distantly a motor car. The wistaria blooming. The old oak slow to green. Unchanged the lawn, pebbles sparse in the drive-way. Beyond the sycamore, bees probably buzzing about its trunk as in the old days; the huge, gray stone trough for horses still standing unchanged.

Six months in bed. Tomorrow he would rise. Months that slowly, slowly passed.

At first tortured, maddened, stabbed by physical pain, then by the gnawing of inner desire. Hours under opiates, vague fleeting hours, visits, friends, flowers, messages.

None from Howard. Who was Howard? Who was this

Howard? Was Howard ashamed to face him? Perhaps he had fled from New York to avoid notoriety. Perhaps—

But why wonder? The world had been charged with violence; foolhardy, he had stalked through it into a flame. The flame had cleansed him pure, white.

Fears gone. Explanations made. Liquor. Liquor. Thirst. That was his vice. The other—he had not been truly vicious. He had been misled; he had gratified monstrous desires borne of liquor.

Simple to understand, to welcome the respite. Simple to lie quiet, drug dulled.

Clearly remembering his solicitous acquaintances who had visited him, a composite of voices, hands, faces. Would he lose his leg? Was the tendon cut? Would he ever be able to dance again? Questions bombarding his ears. His career, his destiny—they worried about that, patronizing Englishmen who hated the Farraguts.

Seriously concerned were his friends of the road tour. Rosemary Rose, pert, helpful; Annie Begley, cheery with grisly humor. Joe, frightened. Frankie, vacant and sad; Ray Leech, Myra Malloy, Jean, nervous because she could not bring Zigzag into the sick room—pretending to care for him, they were thinking, thinking always of themselves.

For weeks he lay motionless, his leg suspended. The operation was postponed again and again. Time passing carried away his "friends." They came less and less frequently. On Christmas, a single visitor, Johnny Keeler, Diana's ex-husband, a mere acquaintance, in his hand a gift, on his lips a word of cheer.

The past, sinking into brooding depth, was leaving him

alone. Only one absent from memory: where was Howard? No word, not a word.

Unexpectedly his father, day and night in a bus, had come to New York. The old man was shocked. His face was gray. He was old.

That day, it happened, all danger was definitely past. Infection had ceased; the wounded flesh, freshly knitted, was healing. His leg lay straight on the bed.

"Dad," he had said. "I'd like to go home."

And thus he was at home. Reading. Resting. Tomorrow in the easy chair. Spring passing, he would grow strong again. Renewal, regeneration had been borne to him through an ordeal of pain. He would never, he decided, return to New York.

On the impressionistic canvas of his memory, a detail, lividly plain, emerged. The masquerade, he now called it. For in the still hours, dad at his office, Martha cooking dinner, the Dallas paper read, it was quite apparent that he had never sinned wilfully. Faintly amused at the idea of sin, its old connotation bringing back older memories, a revival meeting at Selma, a tent on the lot back of the Lowell block, red fire outside, hell fire within, a screaming, screeching preacher again and again chanting the words, "Sin, sin, sin no more, ye Sinners." He had not been a sinner. Evil had crept on its slimy belly toward him, forcing him to join—he was still amused—the devil's masquerade.

Here, for instance, in the old frame house, no one had ever heard of "the other world." Inconceivable idea, in the high lighted spring morning, with its fringe of fleece-white clouds, hovering a moment, then hastening away. Inconceivable, indeed, was any life save the simple life, toil,

modest amusement, tender unfolding of love, a "pretty" marriage, squalling children and a succession of mild, equable days leading to a peaceful grave.

Of course, such a life was impossible. That is, now. He was passing young manhood. The boy Kenneth could have been such a Texan. Perhaps he would have been making good money now. . . .

But how account for Mr. Lowell? That old devil had been born in Texas, lived and grew up right here in Selma. What had driven him into the curious bypaths of sex? Fantastic now that castle of Star-ridge; naïve Ken, hypocritical Mr. Lowell. He must ask dad what became of the old imbecile.

For it was imbecilic, now, wasn't it? Ken said aloud: "I'm not really that way." He wasn't, he decided. He'd just never cared about girls. And then Anita, false, foolish Anita. Chance had made her the only woman with whom he had been intimate. She, too, was an imbecile, more than a little mad. Thoughts of her were nauseating to him. He let his eyelids droop; he dozed; he fell asleep.

When Ken could walk, he visited the village. It was much the same. Old Kennealy, the grocer, was gone. An A. & P. had taken his place. Fire had gutted Ike Levine's department store. He'd used the insurance to open a big establishment in Sweetwater, hard by. Mr. Barton was still talking about the God-Like life in the First Presbyterian Church. Dud Betts was married now, two children. Old Asher was dead.

That day Uncle Joe came in from Wayne. Very old now. Eighty-six. Really dad's uncle. He'd butchered a pig, though, that very morning and then driven the wobbly

Ford seventeen miles to put the porker in the smoke-house for winter bacon and ham.

"Smoke cured ham," said Uncle Joe, "is good for the lining of the stomach. Never does deteriorate. When I was a lad fighting side by side with Joe E. Johnston back of Vicksburg, we once captured a wagon load of northern hams from the Yanks. They were spoiled and they were the only spoiled hams I ever did see. Northern smokin', I'd say, northern smokin'."

"As for you, boy, better you'd keep out of them cities. We ain't been needing underground railways here. You couldn't have fallen offa one and nearly had your leg cut off. Better if you'd stayed at home."

He climbed the steps to his father's office in the Lowell block. Stairs creaked under his weight, the old glazed glass door opened. Dad sat behind the ancient roll-top desk. He was aging rapidly, skin tightening, yet he was only fifty-six. Now he was happy. His eyes gleamed at the sight of his son.

"Does me good to see you on your own locomotion," George Gracey said. "Was it hard on you, climbing them there stairs?"

"No. I feel great."

"That's the stuff. Great. And so do I to hear you tell it."

The office had a distinctive odor. Yellowing papers. Dust. Clean dust.

"Same old Lowell Block," commented Ken.

"Yessiree—"

"What's happened to the old guy?"

"Didn't you read about it in the papers?"

"No."

"It was quite a case. You were on the road then or I'd a

written to you. He was strangled by someone in that big place of his where you stopped for a while."

"Strangled?"

"With a silk stocking, a woman's stocking. Lucky for me—the executors of his estate never did come across the mortgage papers, and the bank that held them failed, so it looks as though Jim Winston, who's county clerk now, will do me a favor and I'll have the house free and clear at last."

His father continued to talk, small talk of the village, while Ken shuddered at the imagined scene; Mr. Lowell, clad in the velvet robe, black silk stocking garroted about his throat, swollen purple tongue protruding from his gaping mouth, dead eyes hideously open, the organ pipes high above him.

"I'm chilly," Ken interrupted his father. "I think I'll go home."

June was the month when Ken would go Back East. His leg was now thoroughly mended. He had begun to exercise it. To his relief, he found that the long period of enforced idleness had not seriously impaired his ability to kick high and true.

In late June, New York would begin stirring; new shows for the fall season would be announced. He would find an engagement within a month or two.

He had decided to dispense with Leon Shaw's managerial services. Leon was a producer's man. He had inveigled Ken into signing the contract with Howard. Ken preferred to make a fresh start under new auspices. He might look up Nellie Nasmuth and experiment with a vaudeville

act for Nellie, Norah and himself. Or he might work for a few weeks in picture theatres.

At any event, he would avoid liquor and old friends. He would live alone. He would maintain this even temperament that was now his, the ability to think straight. He would revert to that period before he met Howard, when for nearly two years he had tasted no liquor, indulged in no parties and had had no affairs of any kind.

He would, he decided, avoid emotional stress. The slate was clean now. He had spent five months in Selma and except for a letter from Leon, he had heard from no one in New York. Why should he bother with faithless friends? Had they not used him? Hadn't he paid their bills open-handedly? And amused them?

He was restored, he thought. His path lay wide before him. He would continue to live sanely in New York. He might even decide to marry. It was conceivable that he might find in New York a young woman whose social position would be assured, who would be attracted to him because of his physical charm and his personality, whose moral standards would be irreproachable and who would establish for him the solid basis of a safe position—home and a family.

If he should meet such a woman, he would, as Mr. Barton put it, cleave to her at once. He would propose marriage and go through with it. Love of the sort one reads about—that might develop. Indeed, sentimental love would be unimportant. Salient only would be her guardianship over him, the many minor details of marriage, the little things of life—distractions, petty scenes, localized interests.

To attain this commonplace goal, Ken would begin to observe women. He had never really noticed them before.

They were, it was true, rounded, vividly colored, frequently alert and even witty. A few were notably independent. He wouldn't want that sort. He would prefer a woman of the clinging vine type, one who would force him to cherish her. He would attempt to find pleasure in the sweet ecstasy of fervent kisses, in the warm scent of tingling hair. He would wait silently for these manifestations of desire; he would withhold his participation in cheaper, more devious frenzies, so that, the moment come, he could prove that he was a man, not different from other men.

He was happy in the thought that he had attained a point of view completely at variance with that of other days. He could, he thought, trace the slow development of the decay, now at last arrested, the cancerous growth removed. He was whole, sane. He would remain so.

He did not leave for New York until the fourth of July. It was mid-afternoon, a sultry day with Texas lying on a thin shell above an inferno. Heat waves were rising in distorting curtains from the pavements as Ken walked with his father from the Lowell block to the station.

It was cooler within the brick building. Father and son sat, chatting about little things. Uncle Joe would be down on Sunday; Martha had asked Dad to put in a gas stove, but he didn't want to spend even the three dollars a month instalments. When Ken returned to New York, he said, and when he got a job, he would send money home. And take out insurance. And otherwise become a good boy.

They were still chatting when the rickety local train wheezed into town. The heat had quieted every one down.

No sound except the hoarse blast of the whistle, the grinding of brakes, the gasping of steam-laden air.

What could Ken say to his father? That he had saved him? That his love had restored him?

"Dad," he said, "good-bye." He pressed his father's hand. As he sat on a red plush car seat, he looked out of the window. Crumpled, small, his father was hurrying into the shade of the station.

Ken wondered if he would ever see him again.

At Houston, he changed cars. A short run to New Orleans and then north. The transcontinental train was air-cooled. The Pullman car was comfortable, fans whirring, a solicitous porter hovering about.

"What time is it?" Ken asked.

"Seven fo'ty. Had yo' dinner?"

"No."

"Better go in now or it'll be too late."

The diner was crowded. Bustling waiters, a grave steward, the odor of rich foods reminded Ken of New York. A sensory impression, stimulating his mind, recalled the road trip, gay dinners en route.

"If you don't mind sitting with someone else," the steward apologized, "I can place you at once."

Ken didn't mind and he found himself seated opposite two women.

Her name, she said, was Catherine Granville.

"Not really, of course. I'm under contract to a movie company. I'm really Lucy Faydenson. Don't you like mamma?"

Mamma was sitting at the club car desk, writing. She

was young, slender, in summer linens, her chestnut hair curled perfectly despite two days on the train.

"Mamma is very pretty," Ken said.

"That's the trouble. She's too pretty. They should have signed her, instead of me."

"You're not so bad," Ken said.

"Texan?" she asked.

"I'm an actor, dancer, I should have said, born in Texas and developed in New York."

"Oh, so you've been developed."

"No. I'm still green."

"I'm seventeen," she volunteered. "I make one-fifty a week now. We're going to New York to buy clothes. Mamma, you see, is very rich. Dad pays her plenty for alimony. We're society people, you see. That's how I got the contract. But I've made good—even so. The studio picked up my option."

"Why are you going to New Orleans?"

"It's Mamma's idea. She wants to take the boat to New York."

She was little. Not exactly petite. But small. Small hands, feet, lips. Her eyes were blue with a sheen of gray green. They alternately laughed and implored. Her nose was straight, yet interesting.

She was curves. A bundle of curves. Rounding curves. Arms white and small. Hair wind-blown. Breasts obviously curving.

Ken observed her. "What shall I call you?" he asked.

"Lou," she said.

"Pretty syllable."

"Yes. Mamma hates it. Mamma likes you, though."

"Why do you say 'though'?"

"She said so. She's afraid of the Hollywood boys. Too pushing. She said, after dinner, that you were the clean-living type. Are you?"

"I wash behind my ears." They laughed.

"Let's go out on the observation platform," she suggested. "I like you and I don't want Mamma to change her mind."

"You're frank," he said.

"It pays. Are you going by boat to New York?"

"I didn't plan to. But I might."

They stepped on the observation platform. The night was full of stars. In a corner sat a man. They chose the other railing and leaned over.

"Shucks," she said, "why couldn't we have our own private car?"

"If you had, you wouldn't have met me."

"I mean our car, yours and mine."

"An idea, but an expensive one."

"Mr. Man," she said with determination, "I'm little but oh, my! And Dad is my dad and I'm not divorced from him. He has scads of money and would never miss the price of a private car. What's more, I'm going to be a movie star."

"Then we can have two private cars, one for you, one for me."

"Elegant," she said; and her little hand slipped into his.

Amazingly he relished the situation. What was wrong with it? Nothing. She was a jewel, an ornament, a pretty thing.

"You *are* different," she said. "Are you sure you're on the stage?"

"Sure."

"You don't act like it. It's dark here—"

"I haven't got the nerve," he admitted.

"But you're way past twenty. Haven't you ever—"

"Never."

The man in the corner rose and went into the car.

"Shall we try?" Ken asked. He was positively excited. It was delicious, novel, rare—almost immoral.

He caught her in his arms and kissed her.

"Very talented," she commented. "Thank heaven for kissproof rouge."

"And for you," he said.

"Thanks," she curtsied, swayed with the train and was again in his arms.

He held her, silent, the night air caressing their cheeks. Long minutes thus. The train slowed down. They stood apart. The darkness had created an illusion. Mind with the speed of lightning flashed back to a memory.

This thrill—was it a thrill? Was it potent? Or just an illusion?

Difficult to know the truth. The car door opened. "It's Mamma," she said. "It's a man," he said. He did not move, only his eyes veering to the left.

The man went to the other side of the platform and gazed out into the receding night.

"I'm going in," she said. "I'm chilly. And Mamma might complain. Meet me in five minutes in Car Four."

"I will," he said.

She slipped away, eyes petulant yet amused.

"Have you a match?" the man inquired.

"A lighter," said Ken.

Orange flame flickered and went out. They moved to the shelter of the door, but again the flame died.

"Thank you, never mind," said the man. In the pale light he was no longer a man, very young, little more than a boy. "I remember you," he said. "I noticed you at dinner. You played in 'Sweeter than Sweet'?"

"Good memory," Ken complimented him.

"It was wonderful to watch you. I'm from Cincinnati, you know. I went to the show every night that week."

"You must have been very young."

"Fifteen then—eighteen now. But I haven't changed much. I still think of you as—"

"As what?" Ken asked.

"W-well," the youth hesitated, "wonderful. That's it, wonderful."

He was fair, blond, golden-haired. A fine head. Rich lips. Well set up, too. Soft golden down on his cheeks. Implicitly trusting eyes.

"Have you never been in New York?"

"Oh yes, lots. I came there to see you in 'The King's Own.' But you'd been in an accident."

"Why didn't you look me up?"

"Oh," he protested, "I shouldn't have dared. I always felt I'd meet you. I felt that fate would contrive it, just as you see. Tonight you passed me in the diner. I waited here for you. I could hardly stand it. I was afraid I'd never get a chance to talk to you alone."

He was very fair, very trusting.

"It's simple, isn't it?" he asked. "Life, I mean. You wish hard and your wish comes true."

"What did you wish?"

"To meet you, to be with you long enough to feel the full beauty of your friendship. You've been my ideal. You can't do wrong."

"But you don't really know me."

"I know you well enough. Are you going north?"

"Yes," said Ken.

"By boat or by train?"

The door opened. Lou stood there. At her side was Mamma.

"You'll catch cold out here," Mamma said. Then she saw the boy. "Oh, excuse me."

"What is your name?" Ken asked.

"I'm Tommy Cook," he said. "And I apologize most sincerely for intruding."

"That's perfectly all right," Mamma said.

"This is Mrs. Faydenson and Miss Faydenson," Ken said.

"Catherine has been telling me that you might join us in our sea voyage to New York—"

"Please don't call me Catherine," Lou protested. "It's perfectly silly to give me a long name like that when I have a sensible little name like Lou."

"You are embarrassingly blunt," Mamma said. "Soon I shall be a movie mamma. You'll hate me and make everyone else hate me."

(Deliberately offering me an opportunity for a compliment, thought Ken. I shan't say a word.)

He said nothing.

"I asked the porter if you could exchange your ticket."

"You did what?" Mamma demanded.

"Was I indiscreet?"

"Indiscreet! But Mr. Gracey hasn't—"

"As a matter of fact," Ken interrupted, "I've decided to continue on this train."

Lou, Ken thought, was blanching. Mamma said "Oh!" Tommy Cook said, "Excuse me, I must go in. I'm in Car

Three—Compartment 'B'." He passed the Faydensons. "Excuse me," he said again as he opened the door.

"I'm so sorry," Lou said. "Right here in front of Mamma, I'll say it. I'll be called a forward hussy and what-not—"

"I must be in New York this week," Ken explained.

"New York won't matter," she plaintively shook her head. Tears were rising. She flew into the car, slamming the door.

"You are, you know," said Mamma, "a very bad man to upset my little girl this way. I'd be inclined to scold you, if I didn't like you myself."

"Thanks," said Ken.

"We'll be at the Ambassador next week. Please call. And—good-night."

"Good-night."

When he was alone, he sat down. Steel rails swiftly passed beneath him. The stubborn rotund moon was rising over the flat plane of the fields. Half an hour passed. He did not think. He rested, emotionless.

At last the door opened. Tommy Cook gently whispered: "Asleep?"

"No."

"May I?"

"Sit down," Ken said. "Be very quiet. Peaceful. You will be, won't you?"

"When I'm with you, I don't have to speak. You know."

"Yes—" Ken repeated. "I know."

TOMMY COOK was, Ken thought, heaven-sent. Every man needs a companion. It isn't good to be lonely. Tommy's interest in him was so warm, so obviously sincere, that he could be trusted with confidences. He could help Ken regain lost ambition; he could keep Ken on the straight and narrow path to success.

Thus Ken defended his choice of Tommy as his friend. The train, swiftly traveling east, bore him toward New York. Each milestone renewed memories, recalled emotions. His dream of relentless adherence to a set plan for success on the stage faltered before the impending reality. He turned to Tommy, to small talk, to laughter, in order to avoid increasing doubt, Tommy would help him. The boy's eyes were worshipful. He gazed at Ken admiringly, following Ken's every word with rapt attention. Willingly he assumed the relationship of a faithful slave. "Don't bother—let me do it," he would say. And Ken, glowing before an appreciative audience, would agree.

In contrast to Joe Durazzo, who was dull and heavy-witted, Tommy was golden, pink, cherubic. His eyes shone. His skin was sprinkled with golden down. His naivete was flavored with ingenuous wit, seasoned with sparkling spice. Obscenity came easily to his tongue, delivered with such nonchalance that Ken was delighted. And the boy's repertory of shocking doggerel and scathing songs seemed endless. Amusing, pleasing, he was, Ken knew. And he could

be developed into a living, breathing, glib automaton, responsive to every order of his master, jester, body-servant and slave. Twenty-four hours after Ken had met Tommy he knew that Tommy would accompany him to New York, where they would live together. Ken tried to believe that he would be very happy with Tommy. His attempt to be pleasant to Lou had failed. He wanted no nonsensically gaga daughter with beaming mother attached. Nor did he want an intellectual overlord such as Howard had been. In Tommy he had found a friend, Ken wanted to believe; one who would pay for his keep with honeyed words and devotion. As Ken watched the city engulf the train, speeding past factory towns, thence into marsh lands of New Jersey, deep beneath the river into the Hudson tube and at last in the long concrete and steel underworld of the terminal, doubt assailed him. New York, his again to conquer. New York, city of false friends, ambush where his enemies lay concealed—why could he not face it alone? The question rose unanswered. Why Tommy? Why anyone? Why not be self-sufficient, conserving money and strength for the coming struggle? Who was Tommy? Was he to be trusted? Might he not be another of those lazy do-nothings, parasites, beardless boys who, he knew now, would grow into languid half-men? Was he himself really one of them? Hopelessly so?

It was too late to reconsider. Tommy was his and for the present, his he would remain.

The city seemed much the same, streets as crowded, buildings in their familiar places, the city's cries as varied; taxicabs sped by to the staccato tattoo of riveting, beneath the limited field of a concrete-walled sky.

He decided to live on Seventy-second Street. He chose

a small furnished apartment in a new building. Three rooms, shiningly bright with the varnished freshness of a shop-window setting, paint still sticky, chairs yet to be sat upon, tapestries new from factory machines, lithographed reproductions of Remington, Millet, a plaster Rodin "Thinker."

Perhaps the first realization of change came to Ken when he revisited Broadway, a Broadway where the triangle of Times Square lay sulking in a mid-summer sun. Pedestrians crawled. Taxis rolled slowly. The sky was dull, the pavements steamed. Ken went straight to Jimmy Pierce's dance studio. He was eager for a work-out, eager to feel the hard floor beneath his feet, to use again his softening body, to bring back in the dance the rich sensation of hot blood racing through veins.

A season had passed. The colored dance director was breaking in new pupils as Ken appeared. He was received with the warmth due a new client. The stocky negro stood near the window as Ken began a series of setting up exercises.

"I need a few new routines and some tap work," Ken confidently suggested.

When he attempted the aeroplane kicks, oblique lacing of legs in a sweeping arc, he found his muscles heavy, his breath hard. He sat down. "I'm hot," he panted.

"You need plenty of work," said Jimmy Pierce.

Max Price, the agent, was an old-time vaudeville booker. Tall, gray-haired, eyes penetrating as a needle-point, he traded on the Broadway market, shrewdly choosing his human chattel. Price was nearing sixty. He had a reputation for ruthlessness. To be under his management was

an accolade for which many actors fought. Ken was flattered to know that Max Price would succeed Leon Shaw as his agent.

"I can get you an engagement in a fall show," Price said. "However, you'll have to stop drinking."

"I haven't touched a drop in nearly a year," Ken told him. Apparently ill-repute is easily remembered, seldom forgot.

"Stay away from it," Price ordered.

It was easy enough to stay away from liquor. Ken was prepared to work, not to play. He reported each day at Pierce's. His body responded slowly, was systematically put through its paces. He made no attempt to work on a new routine. He was not yet ready.

During these first busy days he found in Tommy an agreeable mate. The boy's hair, as Ken exercised at Pierce's, was an aureole, glowing in the shadow of the dingy practice room. He was forever at Ken's side, offering fresh ice water, running to the next-door cafeteria for a sandwich, fanning Ken when the heat overcame him. Nice to have a friend such as Tommy.

It was not difficult for Ken to deceive himself into believing that Tommy's attachment to him was arranged by a benevolent fate. Nevertheless, sturdy resolutions and bitter lessons learned at a terrible price were forgotten. The very presence of Tommy was evidence that Ken was moving again in a familiar orbit, the path of which had been determined and which he, despite the exercise of his free will, could never change. And yet—what price sin?

At home, lying on his bed, a purple silk robe lightly covering his fair body, Tommy seemed the picture of

innocence. A baby, a trusting baby, possibly a trifle studied in his attitudes, too ardent in his emotional reactions, too blithe in his quiet acceptance of caresses and contacts. Yet, superficially a trusting, loving child.

What was one to fear from a child?

Ken was unprepared when Max Price's first summons came.

"I can't show anything yet," he told his agent.

"It's for the Commodore," Price said.

"Colman?"

"Gebhardt is branching out for himself. You know, he produced with Vincent Yeager last year. He's taken over the Commodore."

"It's impossible. I'm sorry. I haven't been able to work up a new dance. I can't go."

"Nonsense. You told me Colman always fathered you. He has an interest in the show. Drop in and see him. Maybe he can get Gebhardt to sign you without a tryout."

To return to the Commodore, scene of so many happy days would be like walking through the tomb of an Egyptian Pharaoh, a grave above the earth, dustless corpse of a dead dream.

At the Commodore, a new stage-doorman halted Ken. The Colonel, he learned, fading into senility, had gone home to Kentucky to die amid the mingled scent of blue grass and Bourbon whiskey.

On the stage, the same little stage, where he had danced so brilliantly with Norah, half darkness, a pilot lamp casting tall, eerie shadows into the cavernous corners of the auditorium. Through the aisles to the balcony stairs, a door marked "Private" and Ken stood in the offices.

Frail ghosts, echoes of youthful voices, barely heard, the full strong step of his friend—these memories made Ken strain, his senses attempting to re-people the void created by the passing of time.

In the front office, Henry Colman, older, less portly, his skin thinner, a delicate scarlet line beneath eye pouches; he rose.

"Dear boy," he said.

"Boss," said Ken.

They talked of the past. Howard, it appeared, was in England. He had produced no new show. Henry Colman apologized for not visiting Ken during his long stay at the hospital.

"How's your leg?" he asked.

"Well as ever," said Ken.

"Can you do a step or two for Gebhardt?"

"I'd rather not," Ken said. "I'm working on some new numbers now."

"If I were you, I'd dance your old specialty. You can still do that, I suppose. He won't remember it. Then when you go into rehearsal about a month from now you can build something new."

Ken hesitated. Henry Colman was insistent. "I like you, son. I drink, too, once in a while, you know."

"I haven't touched a drop in nearly a year," said Ken.

He danced for Gebhardt. A pianist played the time-step number from "Sweeter Than Sweet." He was on the stage of the Commodore Theatre, where that very dance had stopped the show, night after night. Yet everything was changed. He could not keep time. He could not kick above his head. His oblique side-kicks were impossible.

Moreover, his body was heavy, sluggish, a soft mass of slow-moving flesh. It had lost its youthful grace. One felt, watching it, that the legs were no longer finely drawn, the stomach no longer lay quite flat, the joints were almost perceptibly swollen.

Ken returned to the apartment. He dropped upon a couch. He lay exhausted. Gebhardt had said, "I'll call Max Price about you." Ken had not talked again to Henry Colman. Now his muscles ached. Hard lumps seemed knotted in the leg he had lamed. His fingers probed the tendons. Scars were there but no tangible swelling. His eyes became heavy. Tommy brought him a glass of water.

"I'm sick," Ken murmured. "I think I really need a drink."

"Shall I buy some gin?" Tommy asked.

"No," Ken abruptly decided. "Go to the drug store and buy a few bromides. I'll try to sleep."

In the morning, his throat ached; he was still heavy lidded. His muscles were stiff. He postponed his appointment with Jimmy Pierce. He lay inert until past noon.

In the wise friendly face of Leo Murrell was understanding. He was more like a father—a real father—Ken thought, than a physician. Broadway's physician, he was called. Doctor to stars and to chorus people, skillful surgeon, his ear ever filled with intimate secrets, Leo Murrell occupied a unique place in the theatrical world. His apartment was divided into two parts, office and club. His door was never latched. Visitors dropped in at all hours. In a cabinet was liquor; ice in the kitchen. If Dr. Murrell was busy with his practise, the visitor might prepare his own drinks, meet Leo's friends, discuss pertinent affairs of the

street. To Dr. Murrell came elegant young women, rising stars of Broadway, the beauty of their bodies, the slim perfection of them was both a source of pride and of fear. Were they growing old? Had they been indiscreet? How could they avoid the consequences of love? How destroy its after-effects?

Men, thoughtless, willful men, came, too, to the doctor, whose narrow eyes and firm lips could open in full robust laughter at a topical jest. He knew these men so well. He had been their sort, lusty, strong in passion, careless of consequences.

He studied Ken. "You're a finely poised individual," he said. "I know all about you. Heard of your accident."

"It wasn't an accident. I was drunk," Ken said. "I did it myself."

"Didn't you want to dance again?"

"I wanted to destroy myself."

"I've heard you are homosexual. Is it true?"

Ken blinked at the bald question. "Yes."

"You surprise me. Not by the fact, but because you admit it—"

"I—"

Dr. Murrell interrupted: "I am speaking to you as a physician now. You have nothing to fear from your inability to conform. You diverge from normal, of course. But that is not to say that you are abnormal. Perhaps you are a more complex organism than we others. Don't worry about that."

"But my physical condition—?"

"I'll look into that thoroughly. We'll try everything, metabolism, blood tests, sputum analysis, urinalysis, and so on. Let's get under way."

With the swiftness of a hammer stroke, the blow fell. He had held the card in his hand. It was attached to a long sheet of paper, columns divided by fine lines, subdivided into narrow boxes.

"The sum of human misery," Dr. Murrell had said. He had been cheerful. "It isn't anything," he added. "That is, anything of importance. Normal heart, lungs, metabolism on the minus side. And then a red circle—danger. Wasserman plus one."

Leisurely spoken words. "That means?" Ken asked.

"A local syphilitic condition. Easy to treat. A few months' care. Occasional treatment for a year or so. I suspected as much the other day."

"But—but will I be able to dance?"

"By January, yes."

Ken had left Dr. Murrell's office with firm step, head up. His homeward path took him through Central Park. Anger, blind red anger was rising within him as he strode along, pulse accentuated into trip-hammer beat against his ears. The day was uncommonly cool for late August. Boys were kicking and passing footballs on the playground field. A short cut traversed a mass of rock. Ken breathlessly trod the tall grass at the base of the pile. Beyond, past the iron railing, the road, motor cars hurrying, the bridle path vanishing behind a softly carpeted green knoll and emerging straight and dusty, before the sheep meadow.

Ken quit the park at Seventy-second Street. The door of his apartment was open. No one was in the living room. Shades drawn, heavy red curtain shutting out even a faint reflected light, the room was dark and cool. In the bedroom, Tommy lay sleeping. He wore a pair of Ken's pajamas. The sleeves were too long, the legs drooped oddly

over his feet. On his lips contentment, his eyes peacefully closed.

"Tommy," Ken called. He moved. Ken shook him. "Wake up!"

"What's up? What's the matter?" the boy asked, rising quickly from the bed.

"You rotten filthy pig!" Ken cried. "You stinking, disgusting, unclean bitch. Get the hell out of here. Pick up your things. Pick 'em up. Get out. Get out quick—before I kill you!"

"But why?"

"Don't you know? Don't you know what you've done to me?"

The boy seemed to understand. His blue wondering eyes filled with terror. Ken struck him, slapped him, tossed him to the floor, kicked him. He crouched, hands over head. "Don't, please don't!" he whined. "I—I thought it was all over. I didn't mean—I—oh, Ken—oh, I'm so sorry—"

"Get out!" Ken shrieked. "I don't want to kill you—I don't want to kill you!"

His own voice rose hysterically. He ran into the bathroom, locked the door. His shoulders, as he leaned against the wall, shook with the vast tidal flood of his emotion.

Drink, Dr. Murrell had said, would feed the enemy within. He must live temperately, sanely.

How, he asked himself, could he live at all? For many months he had earned nothing. If he had not stayed at his father's home during his period of recuperation, he would have been penniless long ago. Without money, he would have been helpless.

He had heard of Dr. Murrell's "bread-line," the back-

wash of Broadway which flowed up to the door of the warm-hearted physician. To borrow meant to lose caste, to become dependent, to become the object of derision or—worse—of pity.

And how would he live without human contact, without companionship, friendly counsel, the sympathy he craved, the applause that was tonic to him? In the first shocking knowledge of his downfall, Ken had been driven deep into the secret chambers of his own mind. The festering wound was his own, to nurse, to temper with soothing oils, to bind and to cure. He would, he believed, hide. Day would find him secure behind his bolted door. At night, late at night, he would walk through deserted streets or into the park, where only the homeless hid the shame of their poverty.

Of course, there was always the Other World. Vague world now, unreal, peopled by fantasies. The key to that world he had mislaid down there in Texas, where spacious prairies were too wide to conceal its monstrous figures. To meet his own kind was impossible now. To meet them and not to notice their frailties was impossible—unless he drank. And, for the present, he would not drink.

And yet, as time passed heavily, as the loathesome appearance of the disease became noticeable, as he avoided even the casual glance of the hall boy, the newsman, the soda jerker at the corner drug store, as his face, pale in the half light of his apartment, was encrusted with a hard powdery film, he felt the insistent desire rise. Life was empty as an old egg shell and as brittle. Time, jerkily moving forward, sleepless nights, sober days succeeding one another in the dragging pace of a funeral procession, was

the enemy. To flee from the gripping reality of time, to feel black solace of exhaustion, the vacuum of depleted nerves, the annihilation of bruising impacts—would be happiness.

One day Dr. Murrell said: "There. That's better. A trifling case. You're lucky."

That night, alone, the bed unmade, kitchen piled high with dishes, his shirt open at the neck, his lips twisted over set teeth, Ken drank. One drink. Cool white alcohol. Hot. Sharp. The sweetness of the aftertaste. Head larger. Eyes wider.

"I don't like it," he said aloud. He put the bottle aside.

Then smiling with the shy, youthful smile so long neglected, now so seldom revealed, he added: "But I've got to like it." He drank another thimbleful. "'Cause it's all I can afford."

Broadway at dawn was still a busy street. As the eastern sky paled, bringing violet gloom to streets hitherto clad in rich night, lights were extinguished. Warm pools of orange and yellow poured through the windows of the twenty-four-hour restaurants. Laborers were astir. Late home-seeking revellers raced over deserted pavements. A drunk reeled against a building, staggered uneasily, slid down upon the wall. He lay there for a long time, just beneath stairs leading to a dance hall. The iron gate was closed at the foot of the stairs. A kitten slept, head upon its fore-feet. A truck, first of the morning's caravan, rumbled by.

The drunk slept soundly. Rising sun peered above rooftops. A policeman sauntered along, trying door locks, whistling, ignoring—or pretending to ignore the drunk.

"I can afford to be very gay," Ken told Jules Monroe. "I've got nothing to lose. I'm ready for heaven or hell or both."

The dance director was cool and steady. His eyes bore into Ken's skin like gimlets. His bald head shone with sickly pallor.

"You talk like a fool, Gracey," he said, with a faint flavor of effeminacy in the inflection of his voice. "You overdo everything."

"Come, Julie, let's go places. Let's do plenty."

"I'm sorry," said Jules Monroe. "I'm working now and I must attend to business."

The hell of it was that Joe Durazzo had disappeared, Frankie was not to be found and Jean Pond was, as usual, broke. Others—there had been others, but he hated them. They had been his friends because he could pay for their entertainment and lend them money. In the old days, when life was easier, companions were a dime a dozen. Now he could find none. To drink alone was abominable and now that he had started, he intended to finish his drinking in a big way. Alcohol was cheap, water was free. Alcohol and water were ample substitutes for ham and eggs, coffee and toast. Alcohol, burning slowly, kept his fires of energy from diminishing. He must find someone who liked to drink.

On Fifth Avenue, in a white-tiled restaurant, wasp-waisted, narrow-shouldered youths gathered each night after midnight. The price of coffee and cakes purchased a cane-seated chair. Secure in the knowledge that they were among their fellows, they joyfully prattled, indulging in a penchant for flippant jokes and current tid-bits of gossip.

At Ferris's, Ken met Verne Dennett. Chance brought them together, the desire for a cup of coffee on the part of Verne, Ken's need of a companion. Ferris's was crowded. The headwaiter seated Ken at the narrow tile-topped table opposite the hollow-cheeked youth whose pallor was accentuated by deep purplish circles beneath his eyes. Black hair fell to his black brows.

Ken was drunk. He had been drunk ever since he had tasted that first mouthful of alcohol. For hours, he had wanted to cry out, to proclaim the glorious news that he was again alive.

"I'm drunk," he told Verne.

"And I'm a poet," the other said. "Name Verne Dennett."

"Can you make a good rhyme about a bad boy?"

"You're not really bad," Verne said.

"I'm awful," Ken winked. "Too awful. I—" He whispered loudly across the table.

"Tsh—" Verne said. "You lack taste, dear one. You are devoid of the *recherché*. You need someone to take you home."

"Yes—take me home," Ken pleaded.

"Drink coffee first."

Warm coffee and a hand leading him out of Ferris's past knowing eyes, lips rouged over cynical smiles. A voice slanted: "Verne Dennett's sleeping again." And others laughed.

Verne Dennett called himself the American Baudelaire.

"My favorite mood is green. My favorite drink is absinthe. And I believe definitely in onomatopoeia."

"Pour me some gin," Ken said.

*"Les sanglots longs d'un violon d'automne
Blessent mon cœur
D'une langueur monotone—"*

The flat on Washington Street was bare. Wooden chairs. An iron army cot. Where Verne lived.

"That's Verlaine," said Dennett. "Nice, too. Onomatopoeia."

Another in the room. A tawny negro. Picked him up on Sixth Avenue.

"Nothing cheaper than a thrill," Dennett said. "Drink."

The door opened.

"It's Feathers," said Verne. "How's trade?"

Feathers was pale. A black shirt. White suspenders. Bell-bottom trousers. A ragged white dog on a leather thong.

"Zigzag," muttered Ken, swallowing gin.

"He comes not from the Boul' Miche, Ella—he drops into the Silver Pig for trade where Zigzag is the name of a movement—and I'm not saying what kind."

"I met a sailor in Willie's, but he'd spent last night with a slut," Feathers explained.

"Dear Willie, couldn't he steer you to anything worth while?"

Feathers flicked ashes from an imaginary cigarette.

"Willie is sorta offa me and I can't explain why."

"Did you pay your percentage, lover?"

"Old Auntie Willie eats regular. She makes plenty in that tea-room of hers. Who's this?"

He pointed to the negro.

"Margie Mills, of the Harlem Mills. Margie changed her name to Mills when Florence died, didn't you, Margie?"

"I did." The dark skinned youth was thin, hollow-cheeked, the cuff of a trouser leg torn.

"And he can do the black bottom quite nicely," Verne winked.

On a table in the center of the room was a china bowl. Verne poured gin into it, two bottles of clear liquid, then heavy orange juice from a milk bottle.

"Who's this?" Feathers asked, pointing to Ken.

"My buddy."

"I get it. Marge, have you got the makings?"

"Marge has the divine afflatus, I have the gin. Together we shall seek heaven."

"Dear me," said Feathers. "I'm afraid I forgot my compact. Margie, do you use lavender rouge? I've often wondered."

"I smoke marajuana," said Marge.

"I know. But do you eat?"

"Permit me, Feathers," Verne said. "Me, a Baudelairean, to quote one the early free verse writers of the horrible nineteen-teens—Margie is now eating ham and eggs in the Harlem of your sexuality."

"Not mine," said Feathers.

"I smoke marajuana," Marge repeated.

Lights low, curtains drawn. The bare floor softened by a pillow. Ken dipped a cup into the bowl.

"I don't like orange juice," he said, and spat the liquor out. A bottle touched his palm.

Knock at the door. Verne opened. Grizzled, gray-hair, matted.

"Hello, Captain," Verne said. "You sent a sliver of shivers down my back. Who's with you?"

In the shadow, against the door, a large man. Deep voice. . . .

"It's Willie."

Feathers jumped up. "Sit right here, darling," he urged. Willie was small, stoop-shouldered. Body like a girl. Down on the upper lip. Voice soft and girlish.

"I'm with the Captain."

"It cost me enough to close down the joint for the night," said the Captain. "Willie, behave."

"You're through with me, then?" Feathers stood at Willie's side.

"I'm with the Captain," Willie repeated, voice pleading.

Feathers' hands, nails pointed, streaked across Willie's face. Willie shrieked. The little white dog yipped.

"Sit down, my lovely ones," Verne calmly said. "Marge is ready."

Willie wept a little on the Captain's shoulder. Feathers trembled. The dog snapped.

"And put that dog in the closet," Verne ordered.

"Not Rover," Feathers pleaded. "He'll howl."

"Let him howl. Let him be the voice in the wilderness calling to you, my children."

Ken poured straight gin into his cup.

"You'll all be happy soon," the poet smiled. "Take your places. Marge, pass the cigarettes."

Marge sighed and obeyed. Ken placed a cigarette at the side of his mouth. "I'll light it, Bud," Verne slipped beside him. The little white box went from hand to hand.

"No music," complained Verne. "No divine music. No silvery strains of the strings, no sobbing dulcet moan of the basses, not even the bassoon choir nor the angelic tinkling of the harp—"

"I smoke marajuana," said Marge, with a grunt of satisfaction. Ken puffed, inhaled. . . .

Rocked gently on a tree-top, cradled softly, oh, so softly, the crooning of a lullaby in his ears—very happy, very happy, very . . . happy.

"A drink?" Verne asked.

"I smoke marajuana," said Ken. "It's sorta, very sorta good."

The little room in the Yorkshire was all he had. Narrow room, in the hotel at Seventy-sixth Street and Broadway. Clean, walls green as in the fine hotels on Fifth Avenue. Excellent furniture and a tiny balcony facing the court. Small, very small.

Verne and Feathers could edge their way into it. They could sit on the bed. Ken liked the morris chair, green, near the French window. They would sit. Talk. Drink.

Occasionally Feathers, no longer permitted entree at Willie's, would bring his casual acquaintances of an evening to the room. Kewpie Lorraine, vendor of obscene postcards, fluffy haired, pre-Raphaelitish in appearance, familiar figure in the lobbies of burlesque theatres, would frequently drop in.

Kewpie lived down the hall. He worked as a photographer's model in his spare moments. He was ever cheerful. "I use gin to gargle with but not to put in the old stomach, dear," he told Ken. "What's the matter?"

It was noon, on a day early in the spring. Ken lay in bed. Feathers was asleep in the morris chair. Verne was curled under the balcony awning.

"I'm broke," Ken said.

"How broke?"

"Three weeks in the hotel. Feathers loaned me two bucks Saturday."

"I've got an idea," said Kewpie. "Will you pose for Uncle?"

"Who's Uncle?"

"Uncle is going to take some more peep-show frolics this week. Would you work at it?"

Ken understood. "No. I couldn't."

"You've seen the pictures. You wear a black mask."

"How much does he pay?"

"Twenty-five a day."

Ken tried to recall the figures on the hotel bill. How much did he owe? Over twenty? Over thirty?

"I'm sorta sleepy," he said. "Call me tonight—I'll let you know."

That afternoon Ken went for a walk. He had eaten nothing, a spoonful of gin had touched his tongue—all that was left of a dozen bottles.

Walking erectly, head light, Ken crossed Broadway and traversed the two blocks to Riverside Drive. Tied to the pier at the foot of Seventy-sixth Street was an old-fashioned three-masted schooner. Ken breathed deeply, as he trod the rotting boards of the pier. He was tired, hungry. He decided to sit down. Near the stern of the sailing vessel he sat; below the ornate prow, the oily water of the river lapped lazily at the pier. Salt sea smell rising from the old hulk, Ken's feet dangling over the water.

An old man approached Ken. He wanted to talk of other days. "Used to have plenty of them three-masters in the harbor in my time," he said. "This old girl—she's one of the last. 'Buccaneer,' she is. Firm bankrupt. No one wants

her now. Wish I could buy her. What I'd—say, young fellow, look out!"

Ken was fainting. The old man's cane hooked his arm or he would have fallen into the slimy water.

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C²⁴

NOT far from the Commodore Theatre was the studio of Jan Dobrinu, artistic photographer. Narrow stairs led to the studio anteroom, where, at seven o'clock, Dobrinu, small, dark, waxed black mustache twisted into two fine points, paid off his models of the day. A boy with face molded of paste, white-lipped girl, hair dankly strung in bangs and square-cut bob.

Ken, shifting weight from foot to foot. Dobrinu handed him twenty-five dollars. Felt hat over his eyes, he turned away.

"I don't like drunks," said Dobrinu.

"I hate you," Ken retorted. Then raced down the stairs, two at a time.

Kewpie stood at the door. Broadway. Dusk. Lights oddly colored against a faded salmon sky. Theatre lights. Street lights. Yellow, red, green.

"Going home?" Kewpie asked.

"No." Ken's voice was coarse. He fled into the crowd.

"You mighta said thanks!" shouted Kewpie.

At the corner, Ken paused. Into the traffic he started. A red light held motor cars at attention. The low pitched tone of an automobile horn shocked him. He halted, head bowed.

"Mistah Gracey," he heard a voice.

He looked up. It was Rutgers. The limousine glided to his side. "Come in, Ken," he heard Howard say. Really

Howard. Not a gin-soaked dream. The living breathing Howard, elegant in a spring suit, seated on the cushions of the car. Beside him a boy of eighteen, a sweet-faced boy, Ken thought; but not much different from a million others . . . round face, soft brown eyes.

"Mr. Townsend, Mr. Gracey," said Howard.

"How do you do?" the boy said with an English inflection. Ken sat facing them. He was weary, drained, depleted. The car, moving, was unreal. Sharp out of the heavens, dull, dead gold, last gesture of a dying sun.

"How are you, Ken?" asked Howard.

"All right," said Ken.

"I'm on my way to my apartment. Gerald is visiting here, visiting America, I should say. Queer thing about Gerald, he's heir to the Earldom of Somerset, and he'd rather croon. What with everyone, from barbers to undertakers crooning all day long, I see no reason why an English aristocrat can't qualify. We're going to organize a band, aren't we, Jerry?"

"Right-o," said Townsend affably.

"And we'll call it 'The Queen's Own'."

"Ha—ha," politely laughed Townsend.

"I just returned from the other side," Howard explained. "Did not a blessed thing except a quiet lengthy tour of the out-of-the-way spots with Jerry. I'm back in harness now. First this nobleman's noble band, what say, Jerry?"

"I'm on," said Jerry.

"And then a musical show, operetta, I think. No chorus, no dancers, beautiful, beautiful music in the modern sense. Too bad, Ken, because I'd like to have you in my new show."

He was older. He was strangely different. Less self-

assured. Nervous. Straight fine lines on his forehead. Blue shadows beneath his eyes.

"When Jerry's the Earl," Howard said, "we'll give a show in Buckingham Palace, shan't we, Jerry?"

"Why not?" asked Jerry. His cheeks, Ken noticed, were pink, round, like—long ago—Frankie's.

"I must get out here," Ken said. The car stood at Forty-second Street and Broadway.

"Look me up," said Howard as Ken opened the door. "I'm at the Barrington again. Can't quit the old place. Jerry has your old room, that is—" Howard hesitated—"until . . . until—" The door slammed shut. Ken had closed it upon Howard's words. Rutgers' eyes were kindly.

"You look sorta peaked," Rutgers observed, grinning. "Come up and let me cook you a meal, Mr. Gracey," he said.

The lights changed. Ken watched the car glide on. Howard faintly waved. Ken stood motionless. His hand slipped into his trouser pocket. He felt crisp money, money he had earned. He began to cross the street. A cab, swiftly turning to the right, shot past. The driver cursed:

"Look where you're going, hop-head," he said. Ken did not hear the shouted words. He walked on, into the interlocking chain of traffic-bound cars.

Not even liquor was his friend, for, in the long process of self-immolation, liquor had ceased to play the part of a drug. The gin he continued to drink that evening thus did not stupefy him; it did not stimulate him. He walked conspicuously erect, on the balls of his feet, like an athlete about to spring into action.

He went toward the Yorkshire hotel, not quite seeing

accurately. It was nearly eleven o'clock; he vaguely considered going to his room, sitting there with a gin bottle and conducting an experiment. He would drink gin, nothing else, noting his sensations at each drink, until he should sink into numb unconsciousness.

He was surprised when a swarthy little fellow darted out of shadows, hands outstretched in greeting.

"I'm Harry Hayes," he said, smiling. "Remember me?"

Ken didn't know him. "You visited me with Howard Vee a long time ago. And I used to drop in at the Barrington. How are you?"

From the past returned a fragmentary memory, Hayes singing his lyrics . . . he was the famous writer of sophisticated songs. "I've been wondering what happened to you," Hayes was saying.

"I wish I knew," Ken replied.

"We could use you in our next show."

"I haven't danced in ages. Don't wanna dance right now."

Hayes grinned. "I'm betting you'll dance—that is, if you find time to sober up."

"Some fun, eh, baby?" Ken laughed foolishly.

"Come on up to my apartment. Some friends are coming over—all quite respectable, but there'll be lots to drink. You're welcome to get as potted as you please."

Plastic as his mood, Ken yielded. The money in his pocket scorched his fingers as he touched it, red flush of shame in the thought of what he had done, chill terror at the realization that he had really seen Howard—a man of living flesh. Haze drifting across his mind obscured the significance of the day's happenings. He might have dreamed the naked horror of the photographer's studio, the dark

prostitution of his body. He might have dreamed the automaton Howard, Howard gibbering foolishly in praise or the vapid object of his adoration. But he had not dreamed. He had been brutally awake.

To forget, he needed more drink. "I'm thirsty," he told Hayes.

"Scotch, rye, bourbon, brandy; take your choice," Hayes said as the taxi bore them uptown.

"I'll take gin," Ken muttered.

The pent house seemed crowded with people. Old, young, male, female, faces, a pink mass, suffused with blotches of black and white, blond hair, black hair, gray hair. Not people; a pink curtain, held before his eyes.

It was hot indoors. On the terrace, green shrubs, potted plants and little tables over which striped umbrellas stood. A long buffet supper. Caviar, cheeses, salads.

"What is it?" Ken asked. "Your birthday?"

"No. This goes on all the time. I feed the open mouths of America. I have a standing order for food at Reubens. I support three bootleggers and at least four waiters. I'll die broke . . . the only way to die."

"I'm ready for death right now," Ken said.

In a mysterious manner a twenty-dollar bill found its way into his hand.

"I didn't mean that," Ken said. "Look here." He dug his hand into his pocket and drew forth some dirty bills.

"Take 'em," Ken said, pushing the money into Hayes' hand. Hayes shoved the bills into Ken's coat pocket.

"Take a drink," the lyricist advised. He poured brandy into a wide mouthed glass. Ken drank. The brandy raced into his stomach. Hayes disappeared. Ken drank again and

again. The faces peered at him, spoke to him. He replied. He did not hear himself speak. A woman's voice said:

"I hear you are the best dancer on Broadway. I'd love to see you dance. Please do"

"I'll do it . . . for you." Ken heard himself say.

The living room was Louis XV. Little gold chairs. Someone played a tune. The faces surrounded him, a flesh-colored wall.

He danced. A few kicks. He stumbled. Someone laughed. The music stopped. The voice said: "It's a shame. Give him a chance." Ken regained poise. He liked the voice. He would dance for it. He lifted his leg in the oblique side-kick. His toe struck a chair. The pain made him stumble. The voice said: "He's too tight."

"I'm not," he protested.

Through a gap in the wall of flesh, he fled into the night air. He passed the tables and the buffet, now strewn with dishes containing broken aspic, shreds of salad, empty bottles.

He stood at the low wall, far above the street. He was rather sick. Below, the park lay like a carpet of trees and Broadway, strewn with diamond lamp light, the silvered lake pale in the full moon.

He staggered along the rail to the side of the house. Here were roof tops, water tanks, a field of apartment buildings. He was like a giant in seven-league boots. He could step from the terrace into space and stride across the city from roof to roof, the world suddenly contracted and small. He lifted his leg over the wall. The voice said: "Don't do that!"

"Why not?" he asked. He couldn't see the woman. It was too dark.

"You'd better lie down," the voice said. He followed it through a window into a bedroom.

"Lie down," said the voice. The door closed. The room was hot. He began to undress. When he was naked, he felt cooler and more comfortable. He felt like going to sleep in his own bed. He decided to go home. Naked except for shoes and socks, he opened the door.

The green and gold room was full of faces. He didn't mind. Inside of him might be rotten, but he was proud that his body was still handsome, straight and unmarked in the bronze light of the lamps.

Men and women were staring at him curiously.

"Wanta see me dance?" he asked. A girl squealed like a stuck pig when Uncle Joe killed it. A laugh. He said:

"Well, I don't want to dance." He thumbed his nose.

He saw Harry Hayes, in the dining room. He went toward his host past the foyer. The foyer door was open. He saw someone, opening the elevator door. He decided to go home at once. He quickly slipped into the elevator. He pushed a button marked: "DOWN."

"Well," the familiar voice said. It belonged to a girl. He turned. She was near him, tall, very near and dark, much like a boy, except that her breasts, rising decisively, shaped the line of her dinner dress. She carried a coat over her arm. She tried to cover him.

"Hello," he said. His vision cleared. He saw her vividly.

"Do you know you have no clothes on?"

"Do you like the idea?"

"You're . . . rather good to look at . . . but what will strange people say, especially policemen?"

"I love policemen," said Ken.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"An insect . . . a worm . . . a drunken bum."

"Let's go back and get your clothes." She attempted to arrest the descent of the car by touching the emergency button, but he caught her arm.

"You'll be arrested," she warned.

"What of it?"

"You ought to be spanked."

The car stopped at the lobby floor. The girl threw the coat over him.

"I'm chilly," he complained.

"Silly," she said. "You can't go home without even a G-string on."

"You're right," he said. "I'd catch cold."

Someone on an upper level touched a button. The car began to rise.

"I'm tired," said Ken, "I'm dead tired." He sank to his knees and leaned against the side of the elevator. "I'm so tired." When the car arrived at the penthouse floor, he was asleep.

Ken awoke in his room at the Yorkshire. The telephone was noisily ringing and he dreamed of fire alarms and ships at sea and tolling church bells before he could open his eyes.

"This is Connie," she said.

"Who's Connie?"

"Your guardian angel. Are you still indecent?"

"No more than usual. Who are you?"

"The girl who saved you from jail and pneumonia last night."

"Never heard of you. Where are you?"

"Downstairs."

"Come up."

He was soundly asleep by the time she opened the unlatched door. She tiptoed to the bed. He re-awakened slowly.

"I'm sorry," she said. She was colorful, dark eyes, slim face, alert, young. "Don't you remember me?"

"Never saw you before," he said. He sat up in bed.

She perched on the chair-arm. Quickly she sketched his adventures of the night. Harry Hayes had taken him home and put him to bed, while she had waited in the hotel lobby.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Never mind now. I can hardly recognize you in your pajamas. Do you know it's four o'clock in the afternoon?"

"I usually get up at five. I seem to remember you now. Was I shocking?"

"What good is a bare man in an elevator? I was shocked, though, to hear you call yourself names. You hated yourself last night. Why?"

"I'm in the gutter," he said simply.

"In what?"

"The gutter. I love gutters. To roll in. You can't fall off them. You're down."

"I judged you were lower than a worm's knee. Well—that was last night. This is today and you've had no breakfast. Shall I order some for you?"

"Shall you what?"

"Try eating instead of drinking. And stay home. You can put on a dressing gown if you don't feel like resting in bed."

"But I—"

"No, I'm not a nurse. If you must get up, I'll go out on the balcony while you drape the virile form."

She was entering the balcony through the French window when he asked again; "Who are you?"

"Connie's the name," she said. "I'll tell you the rest later."

"I'm little Mary Sunshine," she smiled at him. "Honestly. Or maybe Lady Bountiful."

"You seem crazier than I am."

"Sensibly mad. Last night I saw a perfectly good young man going to hell. I decided to reform him. That's why I'm here."

She was well dressed, he noted. Tastefully. Simple suit. A touch of color. Her eyes halfway between hazel and green. A thoroughly pleasing smile.

"My name happens to be Leeds. That's unimportant. My father happens to own about seventy-five hat stores."

She moved forward so that she could look squarely into his eyes:

"Is it true?" she asked, "what Harry Hayes said about you?"

"What did he say?"

"That you were always a good dancer, always charming, that you started to go around with . . . queer folks . . . and then went completely blotto?"

"He said that?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

Ken did not reply.

"I can't believe you are basically wrong. You're a man. Don't ask me how I know, but I do. I majored in psychology at Columbia. I know the pathological ropes

perfectly. You're a messy neurotic who needs attention, mothering, loving. You've never been really loved, have you?"

He relaxed in a smile.

"Perhaps not."

"Why not? You're good-looking. Women ought to fall for you in squads and columns."

"They don't."

"But boys do . . ."

Ken blinked.

"Squirm," she said. "You deserve to squirm. And now that we've hit it, you were plenty unhappy last night. You attempted suicide by leaping off the roof and later by trying to catch pneumonia."

"I was drunk," he faltered.

It wasn't easy to realize that such a person as Connie Leeds existed. During the first few days, he was sometimes inclined to believe that he had imagined her, that she was the creature of some benevolent drug; that she was a good angel who reigned over a happy Paradise into which he had mercifully escaped. Quietly she tended him and paid his bills as well.

For the first thirty-six hours he lay in bed. She watched over him as the jitters brought him close to collapse. For hours he craved a drink, "An eye-opener," as he repeated over and over. Repeatedly he lifted the French telephone from its cradle and was ordering a bottle of gin from the bell-captain. On each occasion she countermanded the order.

"We'll eat first," she always said. "No gin."

To the astonished bell boy who appeared following Ken's

first order, she gave a five dollar tip and a command that he ignore further appeals. Instead of gin, light, nutritious custard, a cup of healing chocolate, cinnamon toast and orange marmalade broke Ken's fast.

"Just like home," she said cheerily. Then to Ken; "Now I'm going to order some brandy for you." She telephoned to a downtown pharmacist and soon she was feeding Ken a teaspoonful of smooth, stimulating liqueur. Following his first meal, Ken was ill. He felt feverish, his pulse pattered and skipped. She sat in the chair reading. He shook with a nervous chill. She refused to call a doctor. He begged for a bromide. She prepared a glassful of effervescent salts. He drank and somehow fell asleep.

He dreamed. He was lying on a field of phalli, rigid, red. A hot wind tossed him to and fro. He was nauseated. He awoke. She held a bowl of grapes before him.

"You need alcohol. Eat these and you'll feel better."

"Where did you learn all that?" he asked.

"I studied medicine," she shrugged her shoulders and laughed a little. "Go sleepy-bye," she said softly. And he slumped into deep unconsciousness.

When he opened his eyes again, she was still in the room. She sat there, watching him, a familiar face, a reassuring smile on her full, friendly lips.

Toward dawn, she was talking about herself. She was, she said, an independent woman. She tried to live her own life earnestly. She had never practised medicine because she preferred to be free. Never had she been in love. Occasionally she had experienced a sharp astonishing emotion, a danger signal. At such times, a man would conquer her.

Paradoxically, the conquest would result in her despising him. And then their friendship would cease.

She was fairly wealthy, she told him. He, as she could see, was poor. That would make no difference. She'd pay the bills. Of course, if he objected to her self-constituted dictatorship, he could throw her out. In the meantime, she would consider him as just another guinea pig, subject of an experiment.

She asked questions. She wanted to know all about him. Gray dawn silvered the city as he told her.

On his mind lay a heavy memory. Of when he could dance.

He told her about his leg injury. He did not explain why he had thrust his leg through the taxicab window. He could not have revived the emotion of that moment nor, if he had tried, could he have analyzed it in simple words. He preferred to call it an accident.

"But why worry about dancing again?" she said. "You don't have to dance for a living. I have money. Father has plenty more. If you want to, we can produce shows together."

"I don't know much about producing," he said.

"You can learn. Money will buy the knowledge of others. And we'll have fun, shan't we?"

Soon he was stronger, ready to stand on his own feet. He awoke on the fourth morning. She was not there. The *News* lay on a chair. A knock on the door.

"Miss Leeds," said the boy, "told me to serve your breakfast at nine. She'll be here at ten."

Grapefruit, Canadian bacon, rolls, eggs, chocolate. His appetite was good.

"Johnny," he asked, "what's happened to the boys who used to call on me, Mr. Dennett and the others?"

"Your young lady told every one of them to stay away. I heard her talking to the thin tall one, Feathers, I think you call him."

"But they haven't even 'phoned me."

"Must be a reason for it, sir," said the boy, as he closed the door.

When she told him that they would have dinner in town and that she had purchased tickets for a play, it was already too late for him to reject her invitation. He would go, he knew. And he would discover the real reason why the girl persisted in treating him as a charge, for whom she was responsible. His mind was clearer now. Unhealthy fear was gone. Palatable heavy brandy had taken the place of gin. He drank it in small quantities at her suggestion.

The daily scene, no longer peopled by the shadowy forms of Verne Dennett or Feathers or Kewpie, seemed brighter. Yet as he dressed, shaving himself, he noticed that he looked much older than formerly. Lines had crept into his face. His mouth was strained and its corners sagged. Beneath his eyes blue shadows, and the color of his cheeks was gone. His body was stiff. Knees cracked and other joints lacked flexibility. Yet he was still young, he knew, still in the twenties.

He was spent. No doubt of that. Regarding himself closely in the mirror, he saw into his own eyes. Questioning eyes these were. Eyes that could not explain the meaning of what they saw.

Later, dressed in the tuxedo he had bought for "The King's Own," he met her. She was so concise, so self-

possessed, her eyes so determined, her chin so firm, that he half understood why he had permitted her to enter his life. Because he couldn't stop her from doing what she pleased . . . that was the reason.

She chose the mirrored elegance of Miramar, on a by-street in the fifties. Very few people there; imported wine, (despite Prohibition).

"Wonderful food," she said. "You do look peaked. We ought to go South and get some real sun. How'd you like to?"

"Florida?"

"I prefer Havana."

"Do you know . . ." he suddenly remarked, "I never realized that it is November. And what year?"

"Nineteen thirty."

He shook his head. "I've lost a year and a half. It was summer in '29 when I left home. I haven't worked in two years."

"Let's not talk about the past," she said. "There's the future."

She was dressed in a black lacey gown. Her throat was white. Her hair was sleek. Cheek bones shaded with rouge. Otherwise natural in the artificial light.

After the theatre he escorted Connie to her apartment. In the cab coming home, he felt a mild sensation of pleasure. This, then, was what going out with a woman meant. Restraint, the inability to express one's self freely . . . that on the debit side of the ledger. The profit lay in an inexplicable sensation of gentility. They were male and female clad in their finest feathers. Each movement,

the position of a chair at dinner, their entrance into the theatre, the taxi door held open after the play, little touching expressions of the male's regard. Of course, Connie was somewhat unconventional. She had talked about him as if he were her oldest friend, even her fiancé. Silently she had probed into his life and had studied him. She avoided the past religiously, spoke of plans, campaigns, decisions, as if she were totally engrossed in the task of recreating him.

He asked himself why she was taking possession of him. Quite calmly he admitted that she was in love with him. He remembered Anita. And Norah. The wise woman had destroyed herself for him. The innocent child had shed a tear and had forgotten. In Connie, he was meeting a new type. The sophisticated woman.

Since Anita and Norah, he had been transformed from a callow child to a man whose inner fire was gone, an ageing man. At twenty-six, he had been already old. At twenty-six, he already stood on the brink of dissolution.

She had rescued him. What would happen? Could he ever become her friend? Could he ever forget the past? Would he ever be able to look at her with loving eyes, to care for her? He was, of course, grateful. Thank God for Connie, thank God. Proof she was that all was not yet lost; proof that he was of finer stuff than most. That a new chapter in his life was beginning.

Why . . . only a few days ago and he was burning up. Insatiable thirst raged within him; decay and despair.

He entered his room, 703, at the Yorkshire. He switched on the light. The bottle of brandy stood on the dresser. He poured a small quantity into a silver cup and drank.

It was a little after one. He had been sitting up in bed, reading a morning paper. He had fallen asleep and had not extinguished the night light.

Kewpie, returning from a stag entertainment where he had been selling post cards, saw the glint of light beneath the door. He listened. He heard no voices. He knocked. The door was open. He entered. Ken awoke.

In the shadows of the room beyond the circle of lamp-light, Ken saw the ashen hair and the beak-like nose of Kewpie.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Hello, Ken," Kewpie said. "I see you got rid of your fair tormentor. Who is the twist?"

"Lemme sleep," Ken pleaded.

"She's softened you. You're meat fit for grinding. Any-one could see that."

Ken smiled. "Same old Kewpie. How's uncle?"

"Dobrinu is going to rent Madison Square Garden for his next art exhibition. Figures to pack 'em in. I've missed you."

Ken sat up.

"So's Verne missed you. And Feathers. Verne says you must choose between flute and lute. I was down there the other evening. Willie insists he always knew you were bisex. I said tri-sex. Isn't cutie a lesbo?"

"I don't know."

"The way she chased Verne one night was a card. He and Feathers were coming up the hall, camping a little. She was on her way to your room. She spots 'em, stops 'em and says; 'Take your crochet needles and your powder puff out into the wide open spaces, pansies. I'm living with Ken Gracey now and I'm no nance. . . . If you look closely

you'll find out I'm a he-woman and any he-woman can scratch a she-man's eyes out!" The cat!"

"She said that?"

"I wasn't there. But she might have." He saw the brandy bottle. "You've gone hypo on us . . . is it good?" He pointed to the bottle.

"I'd rather have gin any time," Ken said.

"Here's gin," Kewpie said, as he opened his overcoat. In the inner pocket was the familiar square bottle.

"I didn't do it to get drunk," Ken said to himself. "I did it because it made me feel better. Solider, if you get what I mean. I wasn't alive. Like a shell. I did things without knowing what I was doing. She led me around like a little dog on a string.

"It was all right getting sober that time. And I sorta felt quiet then. I sorta felt clean inside as if I was a fish, cut open and its gizzards pulled out and washed clean.

"I didn't want to be washed clean. That fish, if you get what I mean, was dead. And so was I.

"Now, I couldn't ever kick to her because she didn't preach at me. She never said anything. She played straight and made me miss my laughs. And what good is living, if you can't laugh?

"The point is, if I'd 'a been born a woman, I'd 'a been a whore. I don't see why I'm not one anyhow. Then if I was, I'd say to myself, it's the money I want.

"But I don't want to have a dame lying around waiting to be laid. It doesn't suit me. They all take it too serious. And I never really did want to do it to them.

"I can't say as I like myself. But what can I do? Y'see,

in the beginning, I had it figured out different. I thought I was something. I just ain't. Just ain't.

"Verne," he rolled over, "pour another shock of gin."

The day was the maddest possible. A day for big and little murders. Cutting up people. Jagged glass like razors, slicing flesh. Well, why not? The razors cut him. The glass tore jaggedly into the inside of him.

He was on an awful drunk. Kewpie was worried.

"It's my fault," he said to Verne. "I fed him some alcohol and drops. He drank it, talked a while and then suddenly got up and tore off his pajamas. I locked the door and he went out on the balcony. He yelled and yodelled. I got him inside and he began to scream: 'I'm a dirty mouthed fag . . . a disease! I'm a low stinking slut! I'm a rotten . . . !'"

"Shut up," Verne said. "You give me the creeps." He leaned over Ken, who lay on Kewpie's bed. "His breath is foul as a witch's cave."

"Lay off the poetry," said Kewpie. "I'm afraid for him."

"Stay with him then."

"He'll get the D. T.'s next and try to rape the statue of Civic Virtue."

"I suppose I'd better stay up here with him. Call up Feathers to keep me company."

Kewpie vainly tried to find Feathers. Ken moved restlessly on the bed. Needles, file upon file of them, marched across his back.

"A drink," he muttered.

"Shut up," Verne said, "you gimme the creeps."

At five o'clock that afternoon, Connie called. Ken's

door was locked. She tried it. She called. When she received no answer, she hurried downstairs.

"He came back, Miss," the clerk said, "but I don't know whether he went out again. He was sick, I think."

She waited for nearly an hour. Then she left. At six, Feathers arrived. Marge was with him. The elevator operator wanted the negro to use the service car. Feathers slammed the door. They rode upstairs to the seventh floor.

Verne was asleep. Ken still lay on Kewpie's bed. The arrival of Feathers and Marge waked him.

"I want a drink," he said. Feathers found some alcohol in the clothes closet. Ken drank it.

The telephone bell rang. Verne answered. The clerk wanted Kewpie.

"He isn't in," Verne said.

"You can't put on a party up there," the clerk said. "I had enough trouble with Mr. Gracey last night."

"We're going to put him to bed in his own room," Verne assured the clerk.

They led Ken into his room. "Don't give him anything more to drink," said Verne.

"Well, what are we here for?" Feathers demanded. "You chase me all over town. You get me here all because this auntie has passed out."

Verne took Feathers out on the balcony. Windows facing the hotel court were outlined in light. Night was falling.

"Kewpie's afraid he'll bump himself off if we leave him alone."

"What do you want to stop him for?" Feathers asked. "He's washed up."

Marajuana was cheap. And easy to smoke. Deep inhalation, smoke curling about in the lungs, and time blessedly stops. The gin then quickens the tempo of the heart. Living death. And the impelling realization that life in death is impossible. So what the hell.

"I'm high," said Feathers. He held an unlighted cigarette in his hand. Verne's eyes were glassy. The negro sat, knees crossed tailor-wise on the floor.

Ken had not smoked marajuana. When Kewpie entered, he was sitting in a chair. He rose.

"How are you?" Kewpie asked.

"Fine," said Ken.

"You had me worried."

The door was ajar. Connie stepped into the room.

"Come with me, fellow," she said. Her hand hooked into Ken's elbow. "Come on."

Kewpie said: "We're taking care of him."

"Shut your mouth, you lousy nance, or I'll tear you apart," she said.

"Who's that?" Verne said. "A woman?"

"You forget," Kewpie told Connie, "he's a lousy nance too."

The cab was black and white. She sat beside him.

"I love you," she said. "Do you hear me? I love you."

"Yes," said Ken.

"Yes what?"

"You love me?"

"I just told you so."

"You love me."

"Then you understand? You're not drunk?"

"I'm sobering up. I'm sorry."

"Being sorry isn't enough," she told him. "Look at yourself. Clothes dirty. No shave. Sick. Head big."

"Drunk, that's all."

"No, it isn't all. Those terrible people . . . those boys . . . can't you see they are not fit to breathe the same air you do?"

"My friends," he muttered.

"Your enemies. You must hate them, not yourself."

The cab entered the park.

"Where'll I go?" the chauffeur asked.

"Just drive around and around," she said. Then to Ken: "Darling, I nearly went crazy when I knew you had gone back to them. I was afraid you'd got the way you were that night.

"I want you to listen to me. Let me talk. Hear my voice. Listen. You're never going back to them. You are going to stay with me."

"But I . . ."

"Either that or you go to an asylum. And that would kill you. Ken, darling, it's all very simple, really simple. You are sick. Just sick. I tried to cure you. It isn't just being drunk. It's the other thing, the being queer.

"I don't believe you are queer. I see something in you so precious and so rare, I want to save it. You're a sweet boy, a lovable creature. You need me, a self-sufficient woman. We can go where we please, do what we please."

"Do what we please?"

"Yes. And forever. No money worries. The world to live in. Everything."

"Everything," he repeated.

"We've got to leave at once. Leave New York. Will you?"

He smiled vacantly at her.

"Poor boy," she whispered. "You need love." Her hand touched his cheek. It was a cool, kindly hand. "I don't mean passion. Or raw madness. Love that you have never had. The way I felt tonight proved to me that I could love you that way.

"I was afraid you'd gone mad completely, that you'd let them take you away from me. I was coming over to tell you that I'd decided to go south on Monday. We'd go by boat to Miami, then slowly, south all winter, Havana, Trinidad, Panama, Christmas in Rio, then with spring north again.

"We'd have the finest suites everywhere. We'd buy only the finest foods, and wines. I'd teach you to drink mellow wines sanely. And how to appreciate southern moons and trade winds and how it feels to go naked in the tropics, with warm sun on your body and a whole universe yours to roam around in."

Her arm slipped about his shoulder. She drew him closer to her.

"I'm a woman, darling. A very good woman. Made for love that is sweet and good for you. I like my body. It isn't soft like most women's. It's firm and strong. It can give and take. I've got that for you . . . a body."

She smiled. "Perhaps it's because I met you when you were . . . naked, that I know your body is fit to match mine. You have an elegant body, carefully made body. Those legs of yours . . . they are the last word. How you must have been able to dance!

"And really, sweet"—she kissed his lips—"you have more than a body. You have individuality. Just one of you—made for me."

She kissed his lips hungrily.

"The way to know whether you love me is to take me," she said. "I happen to be the woman in a million who understands that you, of your own free will, would never take me."

"I know how to love. See . . ." Her hand, insinuatingly, gently, caressed him.

"Don't . . ." he said.

And yet . . . and yet . . . her words, pouring forth, beneficent rain upon his parched mind, nourished a thought.

"This is better," he told her.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she cried triumphantly. "I knew it!"

Her body, lithe, quick, close to his, was hot, penetrating wool and silk, the heat, animal heat, quickened the center of him. Faintly roused, the body flashed its message. She could feel him stirring against her.

"I love you," she said. "Say you love me."

For reply, he kissed her.

"I call my apartment Spring in Paris. You've never been in Paris?"

He shook his head.

"Like it?"

"It's pretty."

"It's beautiful, big boy," she said. Cream and green, the rooms suggested spring. Ivy hung from ivory wall boxes. A balcony carried out the detail. Deep chairs, an ivory grate, the piano long and white against the wall.

She had succeeded in bringing a rare sensation of peace to him. Effects of the liquor were being dissipated. His friend, the woman, was curing him again.

She showed him her apartment, the bar, narrow and white; the dining room, with ivory chairs about a long black board; the bedrooms, two, one hers; the other for him, she said.

Her bedroom, haven of repose, high four-square bed of cream, green shades and curtains, a low white lamp. The door open.

His bedroom . . . plaids, deep browns. "For my men friends. Now for my man friend."

Her words wove a spell. She talked about Paris and the artist who had designed these rooms. She confided that he was not the first man she had befriended. But he would be, she insisted, the last.

She talked, as the coffee boiled, as its pungent heaviness wakened him.

"Of love, I have but one opinion," she said. "Love is beauty. Beauty must be worshiped. I'm a pagan, in that respect, darling. I believe in consecrating myself to Venus. My bed is my shrine and you are to be my high priest.

"That's saying an awful lot of words to express a very simple feeling." The quick smile flashed. He was calm and happy. And tired, very tired.

Tenderly, tenderly she had spoken. A single lamp in her room. Water flooding a bath compartment. Over his mind the lifting haze of a storm that is gone.

The bathroom was wide and deep. Marble floor upon which his feet rested, cool marble, making his feet cooler than the rest of him.

A glass door to the bath. Before the door, a table. Colored salt crystals in square bottles. A narrow-necked bottle encased in a basket contained fragrant Sweet William

scent. A row of perfume bottles, musk for the arm-pits, violet for the breasts. Rose water, pale water of roses, for the secret kiss. And a rare distillate, *Cheveux d'Amour*, for the lips.

The atmosphere was heavy. Spring in Paris. New York before dawn. For it was very late. And he wasn't certain.

"I'm going to bathe myself," she had said. "You do the same. Wash yourself clean of your sins, my lamb."

A kiss and then, moments afterward, rushing water.

He stripped. Into the bath compartment he stepped. A multiplicity of handles. Hot. Cold. Needle bath. Shampoo. He wove a curtain of water about him and stood steadfast against it. He touched the tap marked Needle Bath. Ice cold water pounded his body. A violent wrenching shock. Cold heat. Heated ice. Vigor. Flood of blood racing back into his brain. Awareness.

Into his brain came memory. He remembered. Long long ago, he had been young. The rippling laughter of youth on his lips, the love of the dance provoking his body into a rollicking naked frolic. At the door, cold eyes of Mr. Lowell. . . .

Water stabbing him. Young. Strong. Fighting his way up to meet Anita. Cold water vividly painting a spectral portrait in the spray . . . Anita's voice, so compelling . . . then the foul stench of her.

He stepped out of the bath. Dry heat rose up to drink the parting drops of bath water. A white, fluffy head tossed powder upon his skin. Acting quickly—quick motions, hurry, hurry. He must go to meet her before it is too late. He found the silk robe, white Shantung silk.

He opened the door.

His room. His clothes lay upon a chair.

Quick steps. He must discover the truth. He had lived upon the crater of a lie. He must flee down the volcanic slopes to the valley.

At the chair he tossed aside the robe. Through the open door he saw the bedroom of cream and green, the low white lamp.

She had moved the lamp so that it played white upon her body. She lay naked, an unimaginably pure living statue. Flesh of pink and white, cherry-tinted invitations to kisses, a somber patch of shadow where the roots lay.

He stared. Love is beauty. And beauty is divine.

But love of a woman is dank unwholesome terror, her shrine fit only for the worship of Satan, the sobbing syllable of her prayer an incantation said by the devil's priest at a black mass.

The door of the bedroom closed softly. Adrift on a gentle sea of sensuous thoughts, Connie waited for him.

"Sweet," she called at last, "where are you?"

He heard her words as he was leaving the apartment, like a thief who has escaped the terror of arrest.

On the way to the hotel, he stopped at an all-night drug store. He bought a bottle of gin.

He drank all of it.

When the cab stopped before the Yorkshire Hotel, he was drunk.

The cab driver cried: "One ten, mister."

"Get it from the clerk," Ken said. "I'm broke."

The night clerk was asleep. Ken straddled the tapestry rope across the dining room entrance. Chairs and tables in his way, he staggered to a side door; thence to the kitchen stairs.

Seven flights, up, up, up. He stumbled, he sprawled upon a landing; his breath rose painfully from the caverns of his lungs. He panted, raced up, as if in fear.

Half way he said: "She can't get me—not her!"

To his amazement, they were still there. The Captain, too. And nit-wit Willy. Some sodden. Some half awake. A fetid odor, as of vomit.

"Come in," Kewpie said.

"Welcome home," said Feathers.

"Did the trollop make you?" asked Verne.

"I'm drunk," said Ken.

Marge opened an eye. "I smoke marajuana," he announced.

On the table was a half empty bottle of gin. Ken poured it down his gullet. He fell on the bed, room tip-tilted against him.

"Get off a me," said Feathers. "I wanna snooze."

Whirligig world—silly world. "Poor Gracey," the Captain was saying. "Washed up."

Zigzag fire, arches of lighted lamps before his eyes. Words—Love is beauty, and love of Howard could have been beauty, if only he had known.

What chance had he had? In Texas, a farm boy he should have been. Consort to cattle. Pigs. Sheep.

"He's just a rotten old fag," Feathers said, close to his ear.

"Too bad he can't dance no more," said the Captain.

"Who can't dance?" Ken asked quietly. "Who can't dance?"

He sat up.

"Who can't dance?" he demanded. "Who can't dance?"

He tried to stand up.

"Who says I can't dance? Who says I can't dance?" he cried. "Look. Look!"

He felt the old rhythm within him, life beating a furious tom-tom upon his brain.

"I can dance!" he shrieked.

"Shut up!" said Kewpie.

Ken pivotted, sought the space of a kick. He felt the rhythm within him. He knew how to keep time. His body was fresh and young, unspoiled.

But the room was small and crowded. The jealous walls persisted in moving toward him, the floor insanely spun, as in the funny house at Coney Island; and he couldn't lift his leg from the floor. He tried. Don't say he didn't try. It hung there, lifeless, as if made of lead.

In a mighty effort he attempted to kick. He lost his balance. He fell. His head struck the arm of a chair. He heard drunken laughter, jeers, the bitter tones of derision.

He couldn't dance. They were right.

Blackness of annihilation. Then a desire for air. Someone helped him to his feet. He saw the door.

"Where you going?" asked Verne.

"To get air."

"That's all you got, man," Feathers giped.

He felt the corridor race beneath his feet. The stairs were like springs. He bounded down.

A chair clattered to the floor as he spiralled through the dining room. The side door was open.

Air.

Air. Light of dawn above the buildings. Streets of New York.

Air.

The same air over Texas. Texas and home. He must reach Texas somehow, seek it out and find it. Isn't it the biggest state? Its cattle the beefiest? Its liars the lyingest?

Texas—Texas is west. West is across Broadway, down that street, across that one, hurrying, racing, across another, the Drive, Riverside a blurred green in the dawn light.

Over yonder in the west lies Texas. He hasn't got a dime. Not a dime. Well, then, he'll walk it. He'll walk west on the pier, to Texas. He'll tread Texas soil again before he dies—Selma, fragrant with magnolia in the spring.

To tread Texas soil, he must first cross the river.

Well, didn't Jesus tread the waters? And why? Didn't Mr. Barton say, one Sunday morning, "to prove this is the best of all possible worlds."

What Mr. Barton meant was that Texas is the best of all possible worlds.

Not Hollywood or Mexico or New York.

Home. Home to Texas.

He was in a great hurry and he stepped right off the pier and into space.

His body obeyed the natural law. It fell into the water.

The water was cold. It sobered him up.

He went down. Water fresh in his face.

He came up. Water gulped into his throat.

As he came up, the eastern sun rose in gilded dawn over the city of New York.

Ken's hand stretched out, as if to grasp the city that had killed him.

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